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毖茨《玛雅的生平》的文学伦理学解读

A Quest—an Ethical Literary Interpretation of Oates's

Marya: A Life

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Abstract

Works of Joyce Carol Oates not only cover almost all literary genres but touch upon almost all kinds of subject matters, which go from romantic love, adolescent initiation and college faculty to politics, religion, racism, feminism and self spiritual search. Despite living in the modern and post-modern social context, Oates has insisted her responsibility as “a serious writer” to write something close to reality and express her moral and ethical thoughts through her unique psycho-realistic writing style. *Marya: A Life*, created by Oates in 1989, relates a girl’s initiation story from childhood to adulthood. Yet the novel is absolutely not a simple narration of a girl’s growing-up process. Instead, it fully exhibits Oates’ ethical thoughts on different aspects in modern society by the description of the protagonist’s choices and behavior, with her innovative episodic style. Since there is still no complete thesis devoted to the studies of this novel in China, this thesis attempts to study Oates’s ethical thoughts in the novel from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, with the purpose to further understand Oates’s artistic thoughts and ethical goals.

This thesis falls into five parts. To begin with, there is the introduction in which Oates’ life, her artistic features, her main works and achievements, as well as some literary reviews on her works are presented. Chapter One introduces the main ideas of ethical literary criticism, its development in China and the relationship between ethical literary criticism and *Marya: A Life*. Chapter Two and Chapter Three are the body parts of this paper, in which a detailed study of Oates’s interpretation on the ethical confrontations and choices, from outside and inside, during Marya’s growth is given. The conclusion is to summarize the ethical tendency and thoughts that Oates manifests in this novel

Key Words: Joyce Carol Oates; Ethical Literary Criticism; Ethics; *Marya: A Life*

摘要

乔伊斯·卡罗尔·欧茨的作品不仅涉及了几乎所有的文学种类，并且涵盖了近乎所有的文学体裁。这其中有浪漫的爱情、青少年的成长、大学教工生活，还包括了政治、宗教、种族主义、女性主义以及自我的精神探寻。尽管生活在现代和后现代社会的动荡变革期，欧茨始终坚守自己作为一名“严肃作家”的职责让自己的文学创作贴近现实生活，并以其独特的心理现实主义手法表达自己的道德伦理价值观。《玛雅的生平》是欧茨在 1989 年创作的小说作品。小说讲述了一位女性从幼年到中年的成长历程。然而小说并不像表面上看起来那么简单，它不仅仅是一部关于女性成长的作品，更重要的是它通过描述女主角所经历的伦理冲突以及所做的伦理抉择，全方位地展示了欧茨对于现代社会伦理价值的诉求。鉴于国内还没有专门针对此部小说的研究，本文试图从文学伦理学的角度对这部小说中欧茨展示出的伦理倾向和诉求加以研究，从而进一步了解欧茨的创作思想和伦理追求。

论文由五部分组成。引言部分简要介绍了欧茨的生平、艺术特色、作品涉及的主要题材、主要作品及成就，并回顾了国内外对于她及其作品的研究状况。第一章介绍了文学伦理学批评的起源、主要观点和自身特点，并回顾了它的发展历程，最后分析了《玛雅的生平》和文学伦理学批评之间的关系。第二章和第三章是文章的主体部分，具体研究了欧茨对于玛雅成长过程中来自于外部和内部的伦理冲突的阐释，既有社会方面的，也有自身方面的。其中社会部分又分为宗教伦理，政治伦理和人际伦理三个部分。最后是本文的结论，对整篇文章进行总结，概括欧茨在小说中展示的伦理观点。

关键字：乔伊斯·卡罗尔·欧茨；文学伦理学；伦理；《玛雅的生平》

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Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates is the award-winning author of twenty-seven novels and numerous collections of stories, poetry, and plays. She is the recipient of the 1996 PEN/Malamud Award for Achievement in the short story, and is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Princeton University. Her name is well-known in literate circles in the United States and Europe and she was elected a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1978. “She certainly tried” is the epitaph she wryly suggests for her tombstone (Jay 105).

Almost every paper about Oates would begin with a long list of her books, but she really deserves it with her talent and productivity since her childhood. During her lifetime, Oates has created 53 novels, regardless of her long list of novellas, short story collections, dramas and poetry. Several of her novels have been made into films, while *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996), chronicling a family coming apart in the aftermath of a daughter's rape, became an Oprah pick and a number-one bestseller. Born on June 16, 1938, the now elder Oates at her seventies published her new novel—*Mudwoman* in 2012, and has two—*Carthage* and *The Accursed* to be published in 2013. Actually, Oates's prolificacy has become one of her best-known attributes. *The New York Times* once wrote in 1989 that Oates's "name is synonymous with productivity". Since her teaching life in Princeton University from 1978, Oates seems to start her writing engine and she has published an average of two books a year. Her amazingly fast writing speed has won her the name of “automatic writer”. Moreover, the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* states that “regardless of the outdated complaints of some critic against her productivity and ability to write in so many literary forms, the range and depth of her oeuvre have made her undeniably, and deservedly one of the most distinguished and celebrated American authors” (277-80).

Oates was born in Lockport, New York. She is the oldest of three children of

Carolina, a homemaker, and Frederic James Oates, a die and tool designer. Oates grew up in the working-class farming community of Millersport, New York, which is the archetype of Innisfail in *Marya: A Life*, and characterized hers as a happy, close-knit and unextraordinary family for our time, place and economic status. She was raised as a Roman Catholic in a home free from the depressing economic problems which plague so many of her fictional families. Creating fictional worlds has always been an obsession for Joyce Carol Oates. She began it as a child—even before she could write she told her tales through pictures. In her early teens, she devoured the writing of William Faulkner, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry David Thoreau, Ernest Hemingway, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë, whose "influences remain very deep" (Milazzo 143). Oates began writing at the age of 14, and she was the first in her family to complete high school, which corresponds to *Marya* as the first one in her family to go to university. Her writing continued after she matriculated at Syracuse University in 1956: she turned out a novel in one semester while she majored in English and minored in philosophy. After her graduation, Oates entered the University of Wisconsin's graduate English program. While working on her Master's degree, she met Raymond Joseph Smith, a doctoral candidate, whom she married on 23 January 1961. Oates received her degree in June of the same year and followed her husband to Beaumont, Texas, where he held his first teaching post. Since that time Oates's publishing record has been overwhelming. Novels, short stories, poems, plays, essays, and critical studies seem to flow effortlessly from her active mind.

As one of the contemporary American famous writers, Oates has been active in American literary world since her first short story collection: *By the North Gate* (1963). Aside from her short stories, she is a novelist, poet, critic, book reviewer and college teacher at Princeton University, and she is an extremely popular, engaging speaker on college campuses across the country. The next year, in 1964, Oates published her first novel: *With Shuddering Fall* and since then Oates has been the favorite for various book awards definitely. Apart from *Them* which won the National Book Award in 1970, five other novels, including *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1966), were nominated for this award. The short story: "The Dead" got O. Henry

Award in 1992. Moreover, on the basis of her tremendous achievements, she has been nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature twice until now. Moreover, she is the recipient of several other awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the Lotus Club among others. She is also a three-time winner of the Continuing Achievement Award in the O'Henry Prize Stories series.

As a legendary figure in American literary history, Oates has done a fabulous job on her writing. Her works show the unique features of her own. To begin with, Oates is extremely prolific and versatile. Her prolificacy has become one of her best-known attributes. The New York Times wrote that Oates's name is synonymous with productivity in 1989, but Oates really deserves it. Some critics attacked Oates's productivity and charged that she wrote too hastily. Oates argued at a conference that "no one criticizes John Updike because he writes too much. I think it's sexist. It's because I'm a woman...I'm on a schedule many writers have. About a book a year. Maybe the world sees it as frequent. Is a woman considered prolific if she makes dinner every night?" (Zhu 2). She holds that it's the duty of a professional writer to be prolific. Certainly, with more and more awards and recognition, this kind of criticism cannot hold water at all nowadays. Oates believes that the quality of the books is more important than the amount of one's production. She's always been diligent and full of energy in examining various subjects and exploring different writing techniques. By using diverse narrative strategies, she expresses various emotions and portrays different life styles. In an interview, she says that "productivity is a relative matter. And it's really insignificant; what's ultimately important is a writer's strongest books" (*Paris Review*). Therefore, the ardent search for quality and the amazing speed of quantity have guaranteed Oates's position as a genius in contemporary literary area.

Secondly, Oates is a serious social writer. The presentation of a realistic sensation of life that provides a moral lesson to the reader is the intention behind her work. The concern with capturing the whole experience leads her to pile fact upon fact, to overload her fiction with detail. Often criticized for this superabundance of graphic details, she answers, "One has to be exhaustive and exhausting to really

render the world in all its complexities and also in its dullness” (Joslin 12). She attempts more than a detailed picture, as she has clearly explained in an interview, “What I would like to do, always, in my writing is an obvious and yet perhaps audacious feat; I would like to create the psychological and emotional equivalent of an experience, so completely and in such exhaustive detail, that anyone who reads it sympathetically will have experienced that event in his mind (which is where we live anyway” (12). By doing this, Oates holds an expectation that the reader can understand better, not only his own life, but also the lives of people in vastly different social situations.

Moreover, Joyce Carol Oates’s versatility as a writer relates directly to her overwhelming fascination with the phenomenon of contemporary America: its contradictory social and economic forces, its violent energies, and seething and vibrant atmosphere. Frequent topics in her works cover rural poverty, sexual abuse, class tensions, desire for power, female childhood and adolescence, and occasionally the supernatural. Just as she said, “my work concerned solely with the moral and social conditions of my generation” (35). Oates is at her best to manifest her themes and subject matters in a wide variety of context in which people are faced with some kind of desperation. Although her most frequent focus has been teenagers in troubled families (*With Shuddering Fall*, *Them*, *Childhood*, *Marya: A Life*, and *Because It Is Bitter, Because It Is My Heart*, for example), she has also written about distressed adults in such works as *Solstice*, *Cybele*, and *American Appetites*. Her several series of novels also demonstrate her breadth of subject. Oates once commented on her “laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book” (10), a project well under way in novels which examine the professions: the medicine in *Wonderland*, the law in *Do With Me What You Will*, the religious vocation in *Son of the Morning*, politics in *The Assassins*. The early novels, *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, written about the plight of a migrant farm family; *Them*, about the difficult lives of a family in urban Detroit; and *Expensive People*, about the vagaries of an unhappy suburban family, were conceived as a trilogy devoted to the consideration of three American economic classes. Two more recent series combine an experimental interest in the

forms of fiction with social concerns. *Bellefleur*, *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* are three works in a projected quartet, parodic treatments of nineteenth-century popular genres which, according to Oates, “explore authentic crimes against women, children, and the poor in the guise of entertainment” (12). Under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith she has published novels of suspense (*Lives of the Twins*, *Soul/Mate*, *Nemesis*, *Snake Eyes*, *You Can’t Catch Me*, *Double Delight*, *Starr Bright Will Be With you Soon* and *The Barrens*), united by formal genre and thematic emphasis on the problem of contemporary identity.

Another obvious characteristic of Oates’s writing is her ability to convey one’s psychological states with unerring faithfulness, and to relate the intense private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life. Maybe that is the reason why she is always classified into the psycho-realistic category. “I think I have a vulnerability to a vibrating field of other people’s experiences,” she told an interviewer in 1972. “I lived through the 60s in the United States, I was aware of hatreds and powerful feelings all around me” (Johnson 2). In fact, Oates’s works have altogether drawn a general map for American society, which not only vividly reflects the life of different classes, but also relates to the innermost part of different people, such as the scholar, the lawyer, the priest, the politician, and so on. Therefore, although she attempts to adopt some modernist techniques, like symbolism, inner monologue, mysticism, etc., she is basically a psycho-realistic writer, or “a woman writer with Balzacian ambition” (Lin). In an essay titled “Why Is Your Writing So Violent?” she points out that “serious writers, as distinct from entertainer or propagandists, take for their natural subjects from the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods... The serious writer, after all, bears witness” (Johnson 5).

Published in 1986, *Marya: A Life*, Oates’s 18th novel on her long list, met with critical acclaim as one of Mrs. Oates’s finest works. Brought up in a poor farm in the rural Upstate, New York, Oates has been always set her fictional background at this place. Set in Innisfail, New York—a rural place like Oates’s hometown, *Marya: A Life* tells the story of a girl with a miserable childhood, who struggles to overcome numerous spiritual and physical trials in life, and grows up as a successful academic

and political figure. The novel's unique and clear structure allows the author to emphasize the most significant people and relationships that have shaped Marya's life and personality. Along with the protagonist's life, Oates portrays a group of people that have laid some influence on Marya's growing-up. Vera: Marya's mother, who is an alcoholic, abandons Marya and her younger brothers after Marya's father's death; Wilma: wife of Marya's uncle, is harsh to Marya and feel agitated for troubles that these abandoned children bring to her; Lee, a cousin, bullies and abuses her for fun, forces a secret sexual relationship with Marya from ten years old to fourteen; Mr. Schwilk, the junior high school teacher, is a person of some mental problems and harassed out of the classroom by students; Father Shearing: the dying priest, leads Marya Catholics and arouses Marya's thoughts about religion and morality; Emmett: Marya's first boy friend, is unwilling to rise out of Shaheen Falls and would like to keep Marya there with marriage, but finds a new girl friend as soon as Marya's break-up with him; Imogene: Marya's best college friend once, is very vain and hypocritical guy, spends much time hanging out with boys and fights with Marya for her refusal of casual sex; Professor Fein: a teacher or Marya's first lover, is an arrogant and talented college teacher, who tempts Marya to keep a sexual relationship with him, but dies unexpectedly; Gregory: another lover, accustomed to giving instructions, to being taken seriously, finally gets the only position among eight assistant professors, including Marya; Eric Nicolas: a married man, the editor of *The Meridian*, leads Marya to her journalist career and holds faith for the peace and harmony of the world, but dies leaving nothing for Marya.

Marya's development and her innermost fears and insecurities are revealed in a very personal, almost autobiographical manner in this novel. Once talking about the tremendous tension she experienced to write Marya, "the most 'personal' of my novels", Oates said that she had the feeling that she was "trespassing—transgressing?—in some undefined way venturing onto forbidden ground" (Creighton 2-3). Nowadays, Oates is being placed at the forefront of contemporary American writers and her artistic and academic achievement is being acknowledged by more and more readers and critics. *Marya: A Life* is just one

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