



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019

Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

Elizabeth Spencer's "Owl": Building Psychological Tension through Ominous Portents Tanya Tromble

Tanya Tromble



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2548>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

Number of pages: 189-201

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Tanya Tromble, "Elizabeth Spencer's "Owl": Building Psychological Tension through Ominous Portents Tanya Tromble", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 72 | Spring 2019, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 02 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2548>

This text was automatically generated on 2 June 2021.

© All rights reserved

Elizabeth Spencer's "Owl": Building Psychological Tension through Ominous Portents

Tanya Tromble

Tanya Tromble

- 1 Elizabeth Spencer's three-page short story "Owl" is structured around an owl sighting that the protagonist, Ginia, understands in terms of a legend she has heard from childhood that "[o]wl calls meant death" (458). This idea haunts her throughout the following three days during which she constantly expects trouble to turn to tragedy. By the end of the story, no such tragedy has manifested itself; however, the melancholy tone cast over Ginia's final plea to her nighttime visitor leaves the reader feeling that Ginia may have been right when earlier, "she thought: *Maybe it meant me*" (459). This article will show how the Gothic mode allows Spencer to build psychological tension in a story in which little action takes place, making it an exemplary model of the technique outlined by Joyce Carol Oates—who, incidentally, first published the story¹—in her early essay "Building Tension in the Short Story." Spencer's technique will be highlighted through comparison to other fictional works that also use the legend of the owl's call as structuring trope.

Owl Calls as Ominous Portents

- 2 Elizabeth Spencer's story of gothic haunting is titled by an equally short three-letter word: "Owl." The cryptic title gives no indication of whether the word designates a specific owl or the general notion. The opening of the story continues to nurture this hesitation. The story opens *in medias res* on the female protagonist who mysteriously finds herself at the window in the middle of the night, wondering what she is doing there. The initial question is followed by a four-line paragraph that provides a modicum of a response. She has heard a noise, identified initially only through the pronoun "it," used twice. When the meaning behind the pronoun is finally revealed in the last word of the paragraph, "owl," it is with the same equivocal meaning as present

in the title. Is this “a” specific owl, perhaps “the” owl whose sounds she may have previously encountered? However, the use of the noun without an article is already disconcerting to the reader as it is an unusual formulation, though not grammatically incorrect. Used in this way, it evokes the notion “owl” rather than a specific occurrence of the nocturnal creature. As such, it effectively recalls notions of the ominous, haunting and eerie that cultures around the world tend to associate with midnight owl calls and conveys the idea that the scope of the creature’s effect implicates much more than its own individual actions.

- 3 An owl call in the night is often perceived as an ominous portent of death. In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer mentions, in a discussion of the external soul in folk-custom, that the owl is “a bird of evil omen, creating terror at night by its cry” (798). In Spencer’s story, the threat is more concretely qualified: “Owl calls meant death. She had heard that from childhood. So their cook had told her often. And three times could only mean three days” (458). Indeed, the number three seems to be an organizing concept for the story, both thematically and structurally. In addition to the ominous portent of the legend learned by the protagonist in childhood in which three owl calls announce a death in three days, there is a symmetry of threes to be found between the letter count of the title word and the structure of the story which takes place over three days. We might even find a correspondence between the initials of the title and the ordinally numbered days the story recounts: O for the “obituaries” Ginia reads on the first day, W for “while passing through” which describes the friends she sees on the second day (458), and L for the “lunch date” she keeps with a friend on the third day (459). The first name of Ginia’s absent husband, Guy, also seems latent with meaning. In addition to the fact that it, too, is composed of only three letters, the noun “guy” in English is a generic noun signifying “man” or “fellow,” giving the impression that this character is present in the story more for the function he represents in the marriage than for any identifying characteristics he may possess.
- 4 Speaking about the genesis of “Owl,” Spencer has said: “I was asleep in the guest-room for some reason I don’t remember and heard an owl in a tree outside the window. They usually don’t come so near. I went to the window and heard it fly away, a big creature with a large wing spread. I remembered the saying about owl calls meaning death.”² Accordingly, Spencer places her protagonist in a similar situation to her own as the story opens. When Ginia is awakened by the owl call at the beginning of the story, she had just been “[l]ying pencil straight in the narrow guest-room bed” (457).
- 5 The ominous portent of the owl cry finds echoes in other American literary texts. Ron Rash develops the legend of the owl call more fully in “The Corpse Bird,” first published in 2003.³ In this short story, the main character, Boyd Candler, clearly believes that if a particular type of owl, known as a corpse bird, calls on three consecutive nights, this announces a death. This is one of the signs Boyd learned to read in childhood by “people who believed the world could reveal all manner of things if you paid attention” (166). So when one late-October Boyd hears an owl call from the scarlet oak behind his neighbor’s house for the second night in a row, he “knew with utter certainty that if the bird stayed in the tree another night someone would die” (166). He becomes convinced the neighbors’ sick daughter is to be the death the owl has come to announce.
- 6 Rash’s story stages a confrontation between two modes of existence, between the older folk wisdom Boyd learned in childhood from his grandfather and the modern

rationality he later learned at school: "a new kind of knowledge, one of theorems and formulas, a knowledge where everything could be explained down to the last decimal point" (169). Despite his wife's insistence that the ominous portent of the owl call is nothing but the beliefs of "uneducated people" (176), Boyd struggles with the feeling, ingrained in boyhood, that it *does* in fact mean something although this folk knowledge seems to be "untranslatable" to the modern experience of those around him such as his wife and neighbors (175). He chooses, at the story's close, to accept to appear mentally disturbed in society's eyes rather than take a chance with his young neighbor's life. In the middle of the third night, though he knows his neighbor is calling the police, he cuts down the scarlet oak with his grandfather's chain saw to save the girl's life because it is the only big tree around and legend has it that "a corpse bird always had to perch in a big tree" and "returned to the same tree, the same branch, each of the three nights" (168). In Boyd's thinking, no big tree means the owl will not be able to return, thus the girl will be spared. A similar ideological struggle is staged in Spencer's "Owl." When Ginia first remembers the legend told her in childhood by the family cook, she dismisses it as "Nonsense. Childish nonsense" (458). However, as the story continues, it becomes clear that despite what she knows rationally to be true, she cannot help but succumb to the emotional weight of threat and fear the legend inspires.

- 7 Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, published in 1973, tells the story of a young terminally-ill vicar who is sent to a difficult remote Native parish and must learn to navigate between Christian tradition and local superstition in order to be an effective guide and counselor to the people in his care. The text opens on a short conversation between the vicar's doctor and Bishop. To the doctor's information that the young clergyman has but three years left to live, the Bishop decides to keep the information to himself and assign the young man to a parish where he will be able to make the most of his short life, explaining: "'So short a time to learn so much? It leaves me no choice. I shall send him to my hardest parish. I shall send him to Kingcome on patrol of the Indian villages'" (9). In the end, when the vicar hears the owl call his name (149), he understands the truth of his physical condition, though he will not have to suffer from it as he is prematurely killed in a landslide. A specific association of the owl with death is made at one point relatively early in the story. The vicar goes to visit a woman whose small boy has just drowned. The text evokes an Indian legend: "Did she remember that in the old days the Indian mother of the Kwakiutl band who lost a child kicked the small body three times and said to it, 'Do not look back. Do not turn your head. Walk straight on. You are going to the land of the owl?'" (25). This is the first of five occurrences of the word "owl" in the novel over three separate scenes. The second is when a wise Indian woman realizes the vicar's health has deteriorated: "It was death reaching out his hand, touching the face gently, even before the owl called the name" (141). The third is when the vicar hears an owl call and realizes it is directed at him. Though he only hears the owl call twice, the three-part owl-call related symmetry is produced by the text as the word "owl" is used three times in this scene (149).⁴
- 8 In Joyce Carol Oates's 2016 story "Owl Eyes," the portentous call of the owl is used metaphorically to depict a life-altering experience in this coming-of-age story involving fifteen-year-old Jerald Tabor. Here, the owl is personified in the eponymous "Owl Eyes" character, so named by Jerald for the intense, piercing nature of his gaze, "intense and glaring behind the lenses of his glasses" (107). Over the course of their three encounters, the man who believed himself to be Jerald's father for the first years of his life puts an end to Jerald's innocence and casts doubt on the story of his

conception and upbringing as told by his mother. In the first encounter, Jerald simply notices the owl-eyed man staring at him. There is no vocal exchange at this time (106). During the second encounter, Owl Eyes approaches Jerald and attempts to interrogate him, revealing a certain knowledge of the boy's past. Jerald responds only by running away (109). In the third and longest encounter, Owl Eyes reveals he had been Jerald's father for more than four years when he was a young child. By this time, an incident involving an incorrectly-boarded train has already sparked the idea in Jerald that he "[c]an't trust his mother" (115). The story closes on a Jerald whose allegiance has clearly shifted to this long-lost father figure. At the story's opening, Jerald is described as someone for whom "memory is precious, not to be squandered on what is inconsequential" (106). The return of his repressed memories of "Owl Eyes" are clearly considered by Jerald to be of prime importance as he prepares to set out on the next "great adventure of [his] young life" (107), breaking with the dependency he has had on his mother in a way that one senses he will never return from, ready as his mother once was "to cut [his] ties with the past and make a new life" (113), no matter how much he might ultimately be wounded by his curiosity.⁵ Thus, in Oates's metaphorical version of the owl call, the three encounters with the owl figure lead to a metaphorical death: the loss of childhood innocence.

"Building Tension in the Short Story"

- 9 Joyce Carol Oates has been writing about fiction theory for nearly as long as she has been writing fiction. An early essay from 1966 reveals an understanding of the short story form that revolves around the importance of tension, epiphany and content. Oates begins the short article "Building Tension in the Short Story" by stating that "the most important aspect of writing is characterization." She quickly gets to the point of the essay indicated by the title, explaining that "the means of disclosing character is also important" in order to maintain reader interest (11). In 1966, the year this essay appeared in *The Writer*, her second short story collection, *Upon the Sweeping Flood and Other Stories*, was published along with her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*. Thus, at this early point in her career, Oates already had professional experience with both the short story and novel forms. She explains:

Novels are complex matters; the density of interest has to go up and down. Short stories, however, are generally based on one gradual forward swing toward a climax or "epiphany" in a moment of recognition. A good chapter in a novel should probably be based on the same rhythmic structure as a short story. The novel, of course, can be leisurely while the average short story must be economical. ("Building" 11)

- 10 She further elaborates on what she means by the term "economical": "the writer must be careful to limit the range of his 'secondary' material—descriptions, background. If he succeeds in winning the reader's attention by dramatic means, then the more important aspects of his story will be appreciated" ("Building" 11). What Oates prizes in a short story is that it can "build up tension through an accumulation of detail," thus the use of violence is not gratuitous. She admonishes:

If violence erupts in fiction, it should be the outcome of tension; it should not come first, nor should it be accidental. . . . quality stories usually refine action onto a psychological level. There is "action"—movement—but it takes place in a person's mind or in a conversation. ("Building" 12)

- 11 Oates also stresses the importance of a good old-fashioned idea: "Technique holds a reader from sentence to sentence, but only content will stay in his mind" ("Building" 44).
- 12 Oates's story "First Views of the Enemy," which she discusses in the above article, is a glimpse into the life of a middle-class family through the experience of a mother and young son one afternoon. Their brief encounter with a group of migrant workers whose broken-down bus they drive past creates a feeling of unease and insecurity that does not pass until they have barricaded themselves in their home and relaxed into frivolous, indulgent consumption. The third-person omniscient narration in this story follows a standard chronology, but not much happens event-wise. Rather, as we read, we witness the fear of violence irrationally building up in the protagonist's mind, becoming all-consuming. Oates explains it in this way: "The tension is psychological, not active; the 'enemy' does not appear after the first encounter. We see that the true 'enemy' is the woman's hysterical selfishness, which she is forcing upon her child also" ("Building" 12). Oates's story thus effectively conveys class tension between a materialistic middle-class woman and a group of socially-marginal migrant workers. The build-up of tension in Spencer's "Owl" is also largely psychological, skillfully created by the way in which the story's focalizer, Ginia, interprets elements of her daily life—a relative's health problems, a friend's sick dog, an aggressive driver—as threatening in light of what she fears to be the portentous nature of the owl call which inspires in her a fear of loss. Thus, the "epiphany" that Oates promotes in short-story writing may, in the case of "Owl," be Ginia's idea, when no other loss manifests itself, that the owl has come for her.
- 13 Twenty years after the essay in *The Writer*, Oates's 1985 preface to *Story: Fictions Past and Present* both struggles with the act of defining the form and continues to emphasize the role of conflict. Oates begins this preface to the collection's section of contemporary short stories with the question "How is the short story to be defined?" She explains:
- a perennial question that might be more judiciously phrased, *Why* is the short story to be defined? The art is idiosyncratic as well as "traditional"; its forms are as variable as its subjects; . . . To state that a story is a "short" piece of fiction (not recognizably poetry) might be the most conservative, and certainly the least problematic, of all definitions. . . . prose fiction as a genre [is] immense, elastic, unbounded—one of the oldest yet the most contemporary of literary forms. . . . Its psychological impulse is, *Let me tell you something that happened!*—its assurance, *I'll be brief.* (829)
- 14 Here, the word "brief" communicates the same element of brevity Oates had emphasized in the earlier essay through the term "economical." She also returns here to the notions of violence, conflict and psychological action mentioned in the 1966 essay:
- All art is generated out of conflict; without conflict there can be no movement, no development—no story. . . . The serious short story, like any serious work of art, concentrates on elemental human experiences—death, love, accommodation to tragic circumstances, the opening into new and unanticipated dimensions of being. . . . Since literature in our time is highly reflective and analytic, it should not be surprising that the tone of much fiction is ironic, even somber; its conflicts are less likely to be problems—for problems can be solved—than expressions of the general human condition. (Preface 830)
- 15 Spencer seems to echo these ideas in an essay on storytelling that also appeared in *The Writer*: "Each story I have written commenced in a moment, usually unforeseen, when

out of some puzzlement, bewilderment, or wonder, some response to actual happening, my total imagination was drawn up out of itself" ("Storytelling" 13). Indeed, she has acknowledged that her inspiration for "Owl" came from her own experience of hearing an owl calling in the night. She concludes this essay by making a plea for writers to interest themselves in "everyday accounts" that prompt us to "think of ourselves again in communion with others" (13). Spencer certainly follows her own advice in "Owl" which addresses the primal fear of loss, a shared characteristic of humanity, through the modernization of the well-known myth of the owl call.

Gothic Mode: Creating Psychological Tension

- 16 Elizabeth Spencer has commented that she does not consider "Owl" to be a ghost story: "It isn't a ghost story, just about a real owl I heard one night just outside a dark window. They usually stay far away."⁶ However, it is certainly a story of haunting in the psychological new gothic sense. Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow have defined the New Gothic as a "spirit" or "gothic sensibility" animating the themes of "horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil, and weird sexuality" that, while having freed itself from "the conventional props of the [classic gothic] genre," effectively continues to create "an artistic vision intended to reveal bleaker facets of the human soul" (xiv). Authors writing in this mode "take as a starting place the concern with interior entropy—spiritual and emotional breakdown—and address the exterior furniture of the genre from a contemporary vantage" (xii). "Owl" can be read in terms of this gothic sensibility. Spencer needs only one gothic prop, the owl call, to effectively evoke an ever-tightening spiral of psychological malaise in her main character. The owl call is thus a typically gothic manifestation of Ginia's inner terror at the possibility of loss.
- 17 Though short, "Owl" is carefully crafted to create maximum suspense in an economical fashion. Following the opening scene discussed in the first section in which Ginia is awakened at night by an owl call, hears it three times in all, then remembers the superstition recounted by her family cook before returning to sleep, the narrative covers the three subsequent days in which a death must occur if the omen has been properly interpreted. The accounts of each day are progressively longer and the threats of death they provide become progressively more serious: she "found no name she knew" in the obituaries (458), a sick child turns out to be suffering from a treatable case of acute gastritis, a friend's "little spaniel had had a fierce fight with a neighbor's Doberman" but begins to improve and will not have to be put down (459). As each potential threat is introduced into the text and subsequently made to subside, Ginia becomes "restless" (459). One feels certain she must be hoping one of these threats actually plays out as that would mean her children, her husband and even herself would be out of harm's way. Indeed, when she is hounded on the road by an aggressive motorist while returning home from the movies, this idea occurs to her: "For the first time, she thought: *Maybe it meant me*" (459). The recurrent mention of Ginia's absent husband, accompanied by the twice-repeated variation on "he's coming back next week" also seems to signal to the reader that Guy could be the eventual victim. That this notion is also to be attributed to Ginia herself seems confirmed by her reaction upon coming home to find him unexpectedly returned early from his trip. When she

nearly screams, Guy remarks, "You look like you've seen a ghost," to which Ginia responds, "I feel like it" (459).

- 18 Though all is ostensibly well with Ginia and Guy as the story closes, one cannot help but feel that an unidentified threat still hangs over them as the climactic death promised by the initial interpretation of the owl cry and to which the story seemed to be building, does not materialize, though its inexistence seems a palpable presence just as the night before, Ginia had felt that "the silence [of the night] seemed a presence she might speak to" (459). Indeed, Ginia does not manifest the relief one might expect at her gregarious husband's return. She continues to be restless, rising in the night to scrutinize the darkness outside the guest-room window. The story closes on Ginia's direct plea to the owl: "Come back. You're nothing bad, nothing bad. Only let me hear you once again" (460). However, this seemingly friendly appeal strikes a false note as one feels the "nothing bad" is wishful thinking on Ginia's part, an attempt to convince herself of something she cannot completely believe. Indeed, if Ginia seems determined to convince herself that the superstition is but "childish nonsense" (458), she still remains troubled by the creature's sound because she feels it is a message she is not capable of interpreting: "A call was meant to say something to some other being. Person? Bird? Beast? Another owl? Who was to know?" (458). Certainly, the whole effect of the story is constructed around this mystery. Does the owl call really mean death? Or does it mean something else? If it does mean death, is Ginia the intended recipient of the message?
- 19 The story is constructed around the presence of an absence that results in its eerie, surreal quality, a defining characteristic of the gothic sensibility according to Joyce Carol Oates: "The surreal, raised to the level of poetry, is the very essence of 'gothic': that which displays the range, depth, audacity and fantastical extravagance of the human imagination" (Introduction 9). In Spencer's story, the owl represents an indiscernible "presence fled" (458) that is yet "all so near" (457). It is connected to traces of loss, absence and emptiness, as well as actions whose motives are unclear. For example, Ginia seems to react instinctively to the noise, then interrogates her motives once the spell has been broken: "What was she doing at the window?" (457). The ominous nature of this absent presence is further reinforced by its association with a lexical field of blackness. The noise is produced by an unseen creature on a "moonless night" from "the dark presence of trees outside, branches of elm and sycamore melted indistinctly together" (457). Furthermore, it has the power to conjure up disquieting palpable feelings: the "chill . . . thought-shadow, close to palpable, fell across her" that owl calls meant death (458). Interestingly, this thought intervenes in the story only after the owl has departed and Ginia is faced once again with "[n]ight silence" (458). This two-word sentence is set apart as its own paragraph. It is thus the absence of the owl whose existence hovers behind as a haunting presence that causes the main character's disquiet and sense of confusion. However, the owl is not the only being to make its presence felt on this occasion. Though Ginia is "alone" in an "empty house," her mind is also filled with thoughts of family members and former pets. Her husband is away on a trip, her children are grown and moved out. Even the cat and dog have died (457).
- 20 Chris Baldick explains the Gothic effect in the following way:
- For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent

into disintegration. This . . . may be translated into more concrete terms by noting that typically a Gothic tale will invoke the tyranny of the past (a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present (the liberty of the heroine or hero) with the dead-end of physical incarceration (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in upon itself). (xix)

- 21 In the New Gothic tradition, this incarceration is usually psychological, rather than physically imposed by an outside force. Indeed, such a pattern is at work in "Owl" where the reminder of a superstition learned in childhood colors the heroine's life in pessimistic tones until she is trapped in a pattern of searching the darkness for answers from the guest-room window.

*

- 22 Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, Ron Rash's "The Corpse Bird," Joyce Carol Oates's "Owl Eyes" and Elizabeth Spencer's "Owl" all use the trope of the owl call and its accompanying tripartite symbolism in works exploring issues of health and well-being together with the natural human tendency to fear death, whether physical or metaphorical. In addition to the ominous nature of the owl call that these works build upon and consequently perpetuate, secrets weigh heavily on the plot of each work and conjure up notions of ghostly presences in various ways. However, in comparison to the three other examples, Spencer achieves her desired effect in a strikingly economical way that highlights her mastery of the short story craft.
- 23 Though Spencer did not intend "Owl" to be a ghost story, it is certainly a story of haunting by ghostly presences if not by literal ghosts. When Ginia scares off the owl by opening the window, the sentence "[i]t seemed to have gone straight up" conjures up an image of ghostly levitation, or Christ's ascendancy to heaven (458). Several ghostly presences haunt the text including the deceased pets, Ginia's childhood family cook, the owl that does not return though its presence is felt, and the heroine's traveling husband. When Guy unexpectedly returns at the end of the story, at the end of the third day, his function in the story is transformed from absence to presence. He seems literally to be conjured up by the text, like a ghostly presence, so that his playful "booming" statement to his wife that he is not yet a ghost and will not be for some time somehow seems to cast more doubt than it dispels (460). Indeed, the short sketch-like nature of the story ultimately serves to evoke a variety of interpretations that it maintains in parallel: the promised death is to come to either Ginia or Guy during the night; Guy is a ghost; Ginia returning from the movies is a ghost, fallen victim to the aggressive motorist; or, the owl call is just a natural noise that means nothing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldick, Chris, ed. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Oxford: UP, 1992. Print.

- Craven, Margaret. *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. New York: Dell, 1973. Print.
- Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. 1922. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Print.
- Morrow, Bradford, and Patrick McGrath. "Introduction." *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction*. Eds. Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath. New York: Random House, 1991. xi-xiv. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Building Tension in the Short Story." *The Writer* 79.6 (1966): 11-12, 44. Print.
- . Introduction. *American Gothic Tales*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Plume, 1996. 1-9. Print.
- . "Owl Eyes." *The Yale Review*. 104.3 (July 2016): 105-22. Print.
- . Preface. *Story: Fictions Past and Present*. Eds. Boyd Litzinger and Joyce Carol Oates. Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1985. 829-34. Print.
- . Private correspondence from Joyce Carol Oates to Michaelangelo Rodriguez. From the collection of Michaelangelo Rodriguez. Rpt. *Cahier: Joyce Carol Oates*. Eds. Caroline Marquette and Tanya Tromble. Paris: Herne, 2017. 80. Print.
- Rash, Ron. "The Corpse Bird." 2003. *Burning Bright*. 2010. London: Canongate, 2012. 165-80. Print.
- Spencer, Elizabeth. "An Interview with Elizabeth Spencer." Interview with Betina Entzminger. *Mississippi Quarterly* 47.4 (Fall 1994): 599-618. Print.
- . "Owl." 1999. *The Southern Woman: New and Selected Fiction*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. 457-60. Print.
- . "Storytelling, Old and New." 1972. Rpt. *The Writer* 111 (June 1998): 12-13. Print.

NOTES

1. "Owl" was first printed in *The Ontario Review* 51 (Fall-Winter 1999-2000). *The Ontario Review* was a journal edited by Joyce Carol Oates and her first husband, Raymond Smith.
2. Private email from Elizabeth Spencer to Gérald Préher, September 13, 2014.
3. The story appeared in *South Carolina Review* 35.2 (Spring 2003), and has been collected in *Burning Bright* (2010).
4. In a letter to a former student dated Christmas Day, 1977, Joyce Carol Oates mentions she has just spent a semester teaching this novel. [See private correspondence from Joyce Carol Oates to Michaelangelo Rodriguez. (80).] An immensely popular work in the seventies, Elizabeth Spencer may also have read Craven's work, or at least been aware of it.
5. When looking through his mother's old books at the age of 9 or 10, we read: "He had not yet imagined that curiosity might be wounding" (113).
6. Private email correspondence from Elizabeth Spencer to Gérald Préher, May 14, 2015.

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle "Owl" d'Elizabeth Spencer prend comme point de départ le mythe largement accepté de la nature inquiétante de l'appel du hibou puis construit habilement la tension, non pas par le biais de l'action, mais par le recours à l'allusion, à la juxtaposition et à des références au domaine émotionnel du personnage. Pour comparer ce qui est culturel à ce qui est original dans l'œuvre de Spencer, cet article lit la nouvelle en la comparant à trois autres œuvres : *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* de Margaret Craven, "The Corpse Bird" de Ron Rash et "Owl Eyes" de Joyce Carol Oates. Chacun de ces textes associe la notion de mort au cri du hibou qui se produit par séquences de trois. Parmi les quatre œuvres en question, Spencer réalise le plus grand effet gothique de la manière la plus économique, en appliquant apparemment à la lettre les conseils énoncés par Oates dans son essai "Building Tension in the Short Story". Spencer utilise divers artifices pour évoquer la présence obsédante du rapace. Le chiffre trois régit la structure de l'œuvre de plusieurs manières, intégrant ainsi la fréquence du cri du hibou dans la structure même de l'histoire. Le personnage principal, Ginia, s'efforce de séparer les vérités rationnelles des superstitions, en interprétant les événements de sa vie quotidienne à travers le prisme de la légende du chant du hibou qu'elle a apprise étant enfant. L'idée de perte est continuellement évoquée jusqu'à ce que la répétition de cette notion lui donne un effet de permanence. Ces caractéristiques et d'autres encore contribuent à faire de "Owl" un bel exemple de l'effet gothique.

AUTHORS

TANYA TROMBLE

Tanya Tromble teaches at Aix-Marseille University. She defended a doctoral dissertation entitled "Interminable Enigma: Joyce Carol Oates's Reimagining of Detective Fiction" at the University of Provence in 2010. She has studied various aspects of Oates's fiction including crime fiction, the epistolary form, violence, the gothic, religion, and 9/11. She co-directed a volume on Oates for the Paris publisher *Herne* in 2017. She is a member of the editorial boards of several journals: *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*, *Résonances* and *Journal of the Short Story in English*.