

Poverty and Violence in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction

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Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates, one of America's most prestigious and prolific contemporary writers, favors depicting the dark side of America, especially poverty and violence. This paper studies Oates's depiction of abject poverty, of those most powerless and vulnerable and those who cannot attain the food, water, and shelter necessary for survival during the Great Depression. Then, relative poverty after the Depression is also discussed. Oates keenly observes "the invisible poor" in the affluent American society and gives voice to those relatively deprived and marginal. By analyzing the relationship between poverty and violence, this paper concludes that Oates tries to awaken readers to the social malaise and the real life of the downtrodden and at the same time calls for passion and life's energy. The obsession with the darkest sides of the society is not a sick fondness but reflects the social conscience of Oates as a serious writer.

Keywords: abject poverty, relative poverty, violence, Joyce Carol Oates

1. Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates, one of America's most prestigious and prolific contemporary writers, is widely acclaimed as "a woman of letters" and is particularly notable for her astounding production and fluency in various different genres—poems, short stories, novels and essays. Since 1963, she has been awarded numerous literary prizes and has acquired a solid literary following.

Oates is noted for tackling hard subjects, among which poverty and violence, two issues of global importance and two epidemics prevalent in America throughout history, have been Oates's consistent concerns and favorite subjects. Her fictional world has, therefore, been called "violent, full of destruction, nightmares, and horrors as real as the front pages of a daily" (Grant, 1970, pp. 31-32). However, beneath the grimness of

poverty and violence that characterizes her fiction, Oates is ultimately affirmative in her celebration of a “sense of life”. A thorough research of poverty and violence in Oates’s fiction is, therefore, of utmost significance in understanding Oates and her writing.

This paper studies Oates’s depiction of abject poverty, of those most powerless and vulnerable and those who cannot attain the food, water, and shelter necessary for survival during the Great Depression. Relative poverty after the Depression is also discussed. Oates keenly observes “the invisible poor” in the affluent American society and gives voice to those relatively deprived and marginal. By analyzing the relationship between poverty and violence, this paper concludes that Oates tries to awaken readers to the social malaise and the real life of the downtrodden while at the same time calls for passion and life’s energy. The obsession with the darkest sides of the society reflects the social conscience of Oates as a serious writer.

2. Abject Poverty

Oates was born in 1938, a time of abject poverty. The aftermath of the Great Depression left an everlasting effect on her and made her akin to those destitute and downtrodden. In the mid-1960s, Oates saw herself as a social realist devoted to chronicling the lives of her parents’ generation in the Depression, and writing about the marginal and powerless inhabitants of towns. Her wish, therefore, was to “write directly about the serious social concerns of her time” (McLaughlin, 1985, pp. 21-23).

The Great Depression began in October 1929, causing economic chaos and forcing millions of businesses and banks to go bankrupt overnight. From the end of the 1920s to the 30s, 60 percent of Americans lived below poverty line and struggled for a living. The hometown of Oates is Lockport, a rural area of upstate New York which had been hit hard by the Depression. The few industries in the area suffered frequent closures and layoffs. Farm workers worked desperately hard to maintain meager subsistence. A working-class family, Oates’s parents suffered greatly during and after the Depression. Her father, Frederic Oates left school for work at a very young age, and then did various manufacturing jobs, spending a lifetime on hard labor. Her mother Carolina was one of nine children. When her father was beaten to death in a tavern brawl, she was given away by her mother. The whole family had to fight for survival after the Depression and struggled to maintain their living. Born into such a family and in such a time, Oates surely knows quite well how devastating abject poverty can be on the lower-class people. In many of Oates’s earlier works, the Depression and abject poverty, which deeply affected her parents’ and her own life, have become her favorite subject and the prime agent of her protagonists’ dislocation.

Oates’s portrayal of abject poverty in her earlier works illustrated the pessimistic outlook that the Great Depression spread throughout the country and how people suffered and struggled during this period. In *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), Clara Walpole’s father is depicted as a migrant farm-worker, struggling to get out of his haphazard life of

poverty. He almost killed himself by overwork but still experienced his growing family's immersion in extreme poverty and squalor and the loss of his pregnant wife. Life became absurd to him and changed him into a hardened laborer simmering with resentment. In *Wonderland* (1971), the devastating effect of the Depression is fully depicted on a higher note. The title of the book refers both to the America dreamed of by the first settlers and by European immigrants; and also to a fantasy land depicted by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*. However, the world portrayed in the novel is more like a hell than a wonderland. In the novel's initial events, Willard Harte lost his gas station because of the Depression. Desperate and frustrated, Willard lost the hope of life completely and turned suicidal. *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), set in 1936, tells the story of the Schwartz, an immigrant family desperate to escape from Nazi Germany to a small town in upstate New York. In 1936, a time when the country hadn't fully recovered from the Depression, jobs were scarce. To support his family, the father had to take the only demeaning job he could get: gravedigger and cemetery caretaker. But, no matter how hard he worked, it still seemed impossible for him to make ends meet. Abject poverty annuls hope, throwing Oates's protagonists into a desperate and hopeless underworld.

Oates's third published novel, *them* (1969) provides readers with a better insight into abject poverty and its psychological and material impact on the downtrodden people. The novel follows three generations of the working-class Wendall family, the ghetto dwellers in the city, from the Depression to the Detroit riots of 1967. In her 1999 essay, "them Revisited", Oates explained that the "them" of the title refers to the "poor whites" separated from "us" the readers, "in our democratic nation, a category of them at whom we can gaze with pity, awe, revulsion, moral superiority, as if cross an abyss" (MacGowan, 2007, p. 176).

At the beginning of the novel, Oates presents Loretta's destitute father, an alcoholic casualty of the Depression. Formerly working with a construction crew, Father lived quite a comfortable life and even had a car. However, the Depression ruined everything. He lost his job and turned to work as a night watchman. But soon he was jobless again and worked wherever he could to get a job, even selling papers. The burden of life crushed him and turned him into a hopeless whining alcoholic.

Father's miserable experience reflected the fate of a particular group of people during the Depression, who are, in Antonio Gramsci's words, the subaltern class. Subaltern, meaning inferior rank or station, is a term adopted by Gramsci to refer to those subordinate social groups or classes or groups in society who are subject to hegemony of the ruling classes (Green, 2011, pp. 68-69).

Even after the Depression, the whole Wendall family were still victims of abject poverty. Loretta's husband, Howard, lost his police job and moved the whole family to his parents' house in the country. Later, they moved back to the city and lived in an urban slum. Life was absurd to Howard in that no matter how hard he worked, the burden of supporting his family was still too heavy for him to carry:

He had complained about money... Where did that money go, a paycheck's worth? Where did that twenty dollars go? And on and on, the misery over money, the worry over money, not having enough, too many people to feed, a sick mother in the house and every year the kids got flu and the antibiotics were very expensive. Pills were expensive. (Oates, 2006, p. 146)

Anxiety over money and abject failure overwhelmed Howard. Finally, it was the burden of living that crushed him rather than the accident.

Abject poverty during the Depression caused a strong sense of absurdity among the Americans and changed traditional views held by millions. Before the Depression, American culture was, generally speaking, optimistic, stressing self-reliance and individualism as the means to obtain the "American Dream". However, the Depression turned that optimism into bitter resentment and helplessness. Unemployed men lost hope and their self-respect because of their inability to provide for self and their family, and they could do nothing to change their fate. Traditional perception believed that poverty was the consequence of personal inferiority or lack of effort while hard work and determination ensured that one could overcome poverty. However, the Depression ridiculed this optimistic belief, showing that one's fate is controlled by "an invisible hand" rather than by men themselves. Hard work is no guarantee of a happy and affluent life and poverty has nothing to do with laziness. Herein rises absurdity which prevails over the whole country. By writing abject poverty, Oates portrays the hardships faced by millions of lower-class people, bringing life's absurdity to readers' attention.

3. Relative Poverty

The Great Depression caused abject poverty and cast millions of people into the abyss of despair. Fortunately, thanks to the New Deal proposed by President Franklin Roosevelt, the Americans enjoyed tremendous prosperity from 1940 on. As a result, many people believed that mass poverty would no longer exist in America. In his significant book titled *The Affluent Society* (1958), Professor J. Galbraith stated that poverty in America was no longer "a universal or massive affliction" (Galbraith, 1998, p. 286). In 1971, Robert Lampman, a key economic advisor to President Lyndon Johnson on anti-poverty initiatives, predicted that poverty would be eradicated by 1980. James Tobin, another policy advisor, had been equally hopeful when he declared his views in a 1967 *New Republic* article entitled "It Can Be Done! Conquering Poverty in the U.S. by 1976" (Iceland, 2012, p. 1).

However, the truth is, mass poverty still persists and it is disappearing more slowly than is commonly thought. In his 1962 book *The Other America*, Michael Harrington argues the invisibility of the poor by saying that:

The poor are increasingly slipping out of the very experience and consciousness of the nation. . . . The poor still inhabit the miserable housing in the central area, but they are increasingly

isolated from contact with, or sight of, anybody else. . . . As a group, they are atomized. They have no face; they have no voice. (Harrington, 1962, p. 12)

Poverty remains entrenched, in spite of the abundant resources and wealth the affluent society now enjoys. In fact, views of poverty considerably vary over time. What it meant to be poor during the Great Depression is not the same as in the 40s and 50s. In affluent America, poverty becomes relative in that people's beliefs about the amount of money needed to live within society rises as overall standards of living rise. Hence, relative poverty is closely linked with inequality. It is "the state in which some people's income is so much lower than the general standard in the country or region that they are almost unable to participate in ordinary economic, social and cultural activities" (Ukhova, 2012, p. 3). Across the world, the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" has grown precipitously. Hence, in spite of the economic booms and busts, it is believed that "more people currently live lives of poverty and destitution than at any other point in human history" (Crais, 2011, p. 1).

Oates, a keen observer of the American society, does not fail to notice the deceptive form of prosperity. In many of her works, she writes relative poverty and warns readers of the disastrous effect it can bring. In *them*, the young Jules worked for fifty cents an hour and could support himself by hard work. Therefore, he had grandiose dreams of greatness, dreaming to become an important man when he grew up. However, his dreams were shattered mercilessly as he noticed the stark difference between himself and those upper-class people.

He was shrewd enough to see how the steps they took together while appearing to be the same steps, were in reality far different. They were not walking together, not really. The tips of a dollar or more he sometimes got was a sign of this difference and that it existed powerfully and irreparably. (Oates, 2006, p. 118)

This difference, the core of which is inequality, overwhelmed Jules, reminding him of his relative poverty. As Arye Hillman argued in his book *Poverty, Inequality and Unethical Behavior of the Strong*, "Where poverty persists, the domestic distribution of wealth and income is in general unequal" (Hillman, 2000, p. 3). Vast segments of the population are extremely poor while only a small part of the population can enjoy the benefits the affluent society provides. Inequality gives rise to relative poverty, making poverty even more unbearable.

A similar case in point is *The Tattooed Girl* (2003). In this novel, Dmitri, a well-mannered waiter by day and a drug addicted pimp by night, is also a victim of relative poverty. As a waiter, Dmitri could easily support himself with his salary and tips. In many people's eyes, he might be considered decent and far from being poor. However, he lived in a posh American community and had to serve those rich and pompous elites. Just as Dennis Gilbert claimed in his 2008 book, *The American Class Structure in an Age of*

Growing Inequality, a poor man feels more miserable and unbearable when the society gets richer. Dmitri, definitely not a poor man in any sense, felt inferior and poor with his “subjective feelings of deprivation relative to others” (Lister, 2004, p. 27).

Apparently, Dmitri was in a subordinate position in the American social hierarchy, upon whom relative poverty exerted its destructive power. In the eyes of the upper-class people he served, Dmitri was nobody. His last name was Meatte, which had “no romance or mystery” (Oates, 2004, p. 49). As is well known, surnames serve as symbols of identity and social status. In contrast to his regular patron Joshua Seigl, whose family name represented wealth and fame, Dmitri’s anonymous last name signified his inferior social identity as well as subordinate position. Besides, Dmitri was considered to be typical “white trash”, which is a derogatory term to describe those white people who deal with “economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment” (Harkins, 2003, p. 5). White trash has been considered as a diseased breed and “the degenerate spawn of a notorious race” (Isenberg, 2016, p. 135). To those wealthy people, Dmitri was definitely “white trash” in all sense. White as he was, he was considered as “a separate race in, but not of, white America” (Newitz, 1997, p. 2). Inevitably, he suffered from whiteness anxiety, especially when he was with Joshua, the upper-class Jewish elite. Joshua’s wealth and social status reminded Dmitri of his own inferiority and questioned his identity as a white. Therefore, Dmitri hated Joshua, hated serving him, accepting his lavish tips, having to be grateful and having to like him. He even believed that Joshua left generous tips to show his superiority. To him, Joshua was “the other” in every way: wealthy and highly educated. As in Stuart Hall’s words, “all identity is constructed across difference” (Hall, 1996, p. 117). The differences between Dmitri and Joshua compelled Dmitri to realize a cruel fact that he was nothing but white trash, a genetically inferior race and a white “other”. Relative poverty gives rise to a sense of the class-determined personal, social and economic powerlessness, a complete impotence, filling Dmitri with resentment and bitterness.

By writing about relative poverty, Oates highlights a persistent irony in the affluent society—“the paradox that the welfare state benefits those least who need help most” (Harrington, 1997, p. 9). This paradox produces a greater sense of absurdity, devouring hope and the future of the poor.

4. Violence

Robert Chambers once argued that, “there is a particular obviousness, almost a tautology, about the links between powerlessness and poverty” (Chambers, 1983, p. 131). Indeed, poverty brings frustration and impotence, which in turn give rise to violence. As “lustful destructiveness”, violence arises from feelings of uncertainty, impotence and powerlessness in the face of a repressive, hypocritical and often brutal Establishment (Towison, 2014, p. 80). It is “related to power-relations”. On the one hand, there is “the violence of the powerful”, forcing the people considered dependent to think or act

according to the will of the powerful. On the other hand there is the violence of people who are made or kept dependent: “the violence of impotence”, born out of frustration and anger (Bons-Storm, 2005, p. 85). Violence, ramped up by poverty, seems to become the only way for the poor to get out of poverty in Oates's fiction.

Violence is a recurring theme overshadowing everything in Oates's books. It is widely considered to be “a result of frustration caused by factors such as unequal political power” (Meuronen, 2012, p. 32). Samuel Kirubahar noted that, “her characters fall back on violence when they are confronted with threats to their self-image or with the exposure of their impotence” (Kirubahar, 2011, p. 112). Jutta Meuronen added, from the characters' perspective, that the violence in Oates's works serves as not only “a reaction to surrounding society and the frustration it causes to an individual, but also “a way for said individual to construct their own identity” (Meuronen, 2012, p. 34). In most of Oates books, violence serves these functions, particularly in response to poverty.

At the start of *Wonderland*, motivated by his abysmal economic failure and the foreseeable poverty, the distraught father killed the rest of the family in a murder-suicide, wiping out his whole family except his son, Jesse. Similarly, in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, the father suffered tremendously from poverty and life's heavy burden. Finally, finding no hope in the future, the desperate father killed his wife and nearly murdered his daughter before committing suicide. The story was based on the life of Oates's grandmother, whose father, a gravedigger settled in rural America, hurt his wife, threatened his daughter and then committed suicide. In *The Tattooed Girl*, Dmitri also asserted his authority through violence, in an attempt to fight back poverty. By falling back on violence, Dmitri successfully overcame impotence and regained power and superiority. “He laughed, enjoying this...Cunt, he called her, fat cunt, knocked her staggering backward with a clip to the jaw, so hard he hurt his knuckles, one-two slamming her in the fat boobs, he'd knock her fucking teeth out, she tried this shit again. A human punching bag, the Tattooed Girl” (Oates, 2004, pp. 62-63). For Dmitri, through violence upon Alma, the tattooed girl, he constructed masculinity and regained a sense of superiority and enactments of dominance. Violence served as a way of self-affirmation and functioned as an agency of constructing power, overcoming the sense of powerlessness and impotence embedded in poverty.

The novel *them* opens with a question: “...because we are poor/Shall we be vicious?” from John Webster's *The White Devil*, which sums up the whole novel accurately. Characters in the novel are driven to violence by poverty, thus turning to be “vicious” in some sense. Take Jules as an example. Jules recovered from numbness through violence, in which the passion of life subdues the impotence brought by poverty. Jules modeled himself on the Indian mystic and theorist of nonviolence Vinoba Bhave. He internalizes Bhave's words: “Fire merely burns...fire burns and does its duty. It is for others to do theirs.” But Jules misunderstands this message as an endorsement of violence and anarchy.

At the end of the novel, the 1967 Detroit Riot began and Jules was swept along

with the mob. The Detroit Riot was a series of violent confrontations between residents of a predominantly African-American neighborhood of Detroit and the city's police department, which began on July 23, 1967 and lasted five days. The cause of the riot was the long-term racism, racial segregation and police brutality. However, the deeper causes were high levels of frustration, resentment and anger that had been created among African-Americans by unemployment and underemployment, as well as persistent and extreme poverty. In the novel, Jules was caught up in the heat of the riot and shot a policeman dead with a weary sense of righteousness. Later, Jules spoke on television for his beliefs:

It is only necessary to understand that fire burns and does its duty, perpetually, and the fires will never be put out...Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day!...Everyone must live through it again and again, there's no end to it. (Oates, 2006, p. 325)

Here, Oates warns readers of the destructive power of violence, or more accurately of poverty: as long as poverty exists, the country will be permeated with violence.

It should not be mistaken that Oates does not advocate violence in real life in the least. In fact, violence will not solve the problems of poverty but can create a sense of passion or power, which is what Oates appeals to. Such passion or life's energy fuels a man with hope, counteracting absurdity or meaninglessness brought by poverty. Faced with life's dilemma and especially absurdity, Oates's characters choose to fight back through violence, which gives the utmost meaning to their lives. As Oates once said, "Tragic heroes are heroic because they are gifted with the audacity to undertake certain actions; though they fail, though they do not personally transcend their fates, they are heroic in their ritualistic enactment of the common human dilemma" (Oates, 1973, p. 163). In this sense, Oates creates an amoral world, in which her heroes take violence as their weapon to exert their authority and passion in their fights against poverty.

5. Conclusion

In Oates's literary world, evidence of blight, poverty, hopelessness and violence is available for all to see. We can sympathize somewhat with reviewers who criticize these dark sides in Oates. Her fiction does alarm and repel, but just as Ellen Friedman said, we must admit that "what Oates does describe is an oppressive and insistent rhythm of American life" (Friedman, 1980, p. 8).

Oates is certainly not the first to write about the ills of American society, but her approach is unique in that she makes no overt interpretations or value judgments. Poverty, violence and their aftermath are all present in her novels, but accompanied by no judgment on the part of the author. She "maintains aesthetic distance, never connecting events by casual chains, merely stating facts as she sees them" (Slater, 1975, p. 2). In this way, she presents an amoral world instead of making any moralistic

statements or imposing judgments on readers. However, by her persistent portrayal of “the other America”, readers are awakened to see the social malaise and the real life of the downtrodden. Presenting a realistic picture of the decadence that currently prevails in American society and a heightened sensitivity to the dangers of living, her fiction is not about some fictional strangers but about twentieth century Americans, whom readers can easily identify with. Her writing of poverty and violence sounds the alarm for us all, makes us reexamine our goals of national development, and strive to reduce poverty and its impact on people all around the world.

Oates's obsession with the portrayal of poverty and violence has faced major criticism. But, as Friedman once wrote, “If some of her contemporaries object to her daring range of subjects and enormous productivity, these same qualities, added to her important narrative innovations and consistent brilliance, give the rest of us a new measure of genius” (Friedman, 1991, p. 245). Oates's writings about the darkest sides of American society reflect her social conscience as a serious writer and give her everlasting charm.

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