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Joyce Carol Oates's "Slow": Sudden Detective Fiction?

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Abstract:

Joyce Carol Oates's fictional project, which considers literature to be both a realm for the exploration of unconscious impulses and a crucial element of lived experience, has led her to focus on stories that deal with the aftereffects of violent crime. However, Oates has specifically stated that she does not write detective fiction: she is a writer of what she calls "psychological mystery and suspense" fiction. Rather than the resolution of enigma, it is the act of detecting – the quest itself – which is the most important element of her stories. Oates's stories therefore often expose, but offer no answers to, the mysteries of life. They use textual strategies full of gaps to recreate unconscious processes, and they introduce crime plots that are not fully resolved. Indeed, this is the aspect – the inherently active questioning state of being in suspense – emphasized by the subtitles to so many of her recent story collections which are variations on "Tales of Suspense." In other contexts, Oates has referred to herself as a "psychological realist" and to her work as "psychological realism." This article will use a close reading of Oates's micro-fiction story "Slow" to illustrate Oates's particular form of psychological realism and show how she integrates elements of detective fiction into her writing to great effect.

Joyce Carol Oates écrit souvent des œuvres de fiction qui racontent les effets de crimes violentes sur les vies de ses personnages. Cependant, elle a déclaré qu'elle n'écrit pas de la fiction policière. Elle préfère dire qu'elle écrit des récits de suspens comprenant des énigmes psychologiques. Dans les histoires de Oates, la quête prend l'importance sur la résolution de l'énigme. De ce fait, ses histoires identifient les mystères de la vie sans souvent proposer de solutions. Elle a recours à des techniques elliptiques afin d'évoquer l'état de l'inconscient. Elle introduit des mystères qu'elle ne résout souvent pas complètement. En effet, c'est cet état de questionnement permanent qui est le propre du suspens qu'évoquent beaucoup des sous-titres de ses recueils récents où l'on trouve des variations sur la formulation « histoires de suspens ». A d'autres moments, Oates se définit comme étant un « psychological realist » qui écrit des œuvres de « psychological realism ». Cet article examine de près la mini nouvelle « Slow » afin de montrer comment Oates incorpore des éléments de la fiction policière et du réalisme psychologique dans ses écrits.

Introduction

Elaine Showalter remarked in a 2009 article for *The Guardian* that "from the 1990s to the present, [Joyce Carol Oates] has been writing with ever-more furious speed and intensity on varieties of American crime, from rape to child murder to serial killers, and their effects on families and communities." Showalter may be right about the intensity and frequency of Oates's publications thematically linked to crime. I, myself, felt something similar around the same time, writing in my PhD dissertation begun in 2004: "Joyce Carol Oates's fictional project, which considers literature to be both a realm for the exploration of unconscious impulses and a crucial element of lived experience, has led her to focus increasingly on stories that deal with the aftereffects of violent crime" (478).¹ However, to be fair, Oates has been writing on

¹ However, now I wonder if this is true and think that the principal evolution over the course of Oates's career may be mainly a stylistic, rather than a thematic one. This idea concords with statements of critics such as Linda Wagner, who writes of Oates's "personal movement from the ostensibly objective and factual to the strange,

“varieties of American crime” throughout her whole career, whether the works be otherwise classified as realistic, experimental, gothic, parodic, etc. Indeed, Oates was widely and prominently criticized early in her career for the violence of her plots to which Showalter’s descriptive list could also apply. One need only flip through her first collection, *By the North Gate*, published in 1963, to find “Boys at a Picnic,” a story of three boys on a rampage, robbing and murdering people on a sunny afternoon; “Pastoral Blood” in which Grace set out on a suicidal binge six days before her wedding and ends up in the hospital recovering from an assault; and Oates’s first published story, “In the Old World,”² which is set against the thematic background of the crime-fighting world as it dramatizes Swan Walpole’s spontaneous confession to a sheriff’s deputy to having wounded a negro boy’s eye during a knife fight, a sin for which he feels guilt-stricken. The motives for Swan’s visit to the sheriff’s office are central to the story. He eventually reveals he is interested in his just punishment and is made to understand he will receive none, though we understand he is punishing himself when he remarks, ““Unless they let it be its own punishment, when you feel you’re bleeding inside”” (160). Indeed, from the very beginning of her writing career, Oates has been fascinated with the enigma of human life, stating at one point: “All of my writing is about the mystery of human emotions.”³ This “mystery of human emotions,” as she explores it in her work, is often connected to stories of crime, violence, abuse and loss.

Examples abound. The story discussed in this article, “Slow,” was published in the 1980s,⁴ a decade in which Oates also published the novel *Angel of Light* (1981), which tells of a sister and brother searching for evidence that their mother and her lover are responsible for their father’s death; played with nineteenth-century detective fiction plots in *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984), and produced *American Appetites* (1989), which begins with a domestic incident that leads to the accidental death of Glynnis McCullough and tells of the police investigation into her husband, Ian, and the subsequent judicial proceedings. In the late 1990s, Oates began publishing thrillers under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly. In the 2010s, Oates published several collections with a focus on horror, darkness and dread, including *High Crime Area: Tales of Darkness and Dread* (2014) and *The Doll-Master and Other Tales of Terror* (2016). In the past five years, starting perhaps with *Night-Gaunts and Other Tales of Suspense* in 2018, most of her short story collections are being published with subtitles which are variations on “Tales of Suspense.”

Interestingly, however, the fact that her writing explores the mysteries of life while frequently treating varieties of American crime and that many of her stories are being increasingly labelled “tales of suspense” does not add up, as one might expect, to the firm result that Oates is a writer of detective or crime fiction. Rather, Oates’s self-ascribed psychologically realistic mode of writing can lead to different genre results. Certain stories, which often include segments in the fantastic (in Todorov’s sense of the word) mode, are usually considered New American Gothic⁵: “The Temple,” “Why Don’t You Come Live With Me It’s Time” and “Secret Observations on the Goat-Girl” are three examples. Other, more “probable” crime-related stories, with little or no recourse to fantastic interludes, might be placed in the Detective/Crime/Suspense Fiction category. Indeed, the question of why certain of Oates’s

mysterious, fantastic – or, at least, inexplicable” (xix-xx), and with G. F. Waller’s view that Oates’s early “realistic” fiction evolved gradually to encompass “a much wider range of formal techniques,” “a significant increase in fictional sophistication” which manifests itself in fiction that is increasingly “formally open-ended and elusive” (84-85, 71). [thesis 42]

² Selected as co-winner of the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Competition and printed in the August 1959 issue.

³ Quoted in the biographical blurb in the paperback Fawcett Crest edition of *By the North Gate*.

⁴ Collected in *The Assignment*, 1988, the story was first published in Volume 5 of *The Southern California Anthology*, published by the University of Southern California, in 1987.

⁵ For more on Oates’s use of the fantastic mode in New American Gothic stories, see my “Joyce Carol Oates: Fantastic, New Gothic and Inner Realities.”

works bring detective fiction to mind, without exactly fitting the bill, is one that I explore in my doctoral dissertation, through a discussion of the novellas *Rape: A Love Story* and *Beasts*, and the novels *The Falls* and *The Tattooed Girl*.

Oates has specifically stated that she does not write detective fiction. She prefers to think of herself as a writer of what she calls “psychological mystery and suspense” fiction. In 2009, Oates explained: “The genre I like is psychological mystery/suspense which I think is very true to life.” In her view, the line of demarcation between genre fiction and literary fiction concerns the resolution of enigma. In genre fiction, the mystery is always explained. Literary fiction, however, belongs to a different dimension; each literary work is supposed to be unique, so things do not need to be resolved. Oates’s explanation may be a bit reductionist, and perhaps reveals that she equates “detective fiction” with the classic whodunit/puzzle story sub-genre. However, her remarks do highlight a central component of her fiction: rather than the resolution of enigma, it is the act of detecting – the quest itself – which is the most important element of her stories as she is interested in ways of “pursuing mysterious threads toward illumination and knowledge,” though not necessarily towards classic plot resolution (Interview and Book Signing). It is the heuristic quest that is foregrounded rather than the final resolution of inherently unresolvable puzzles of life. Oates’s stories therefore often expose, but offer no answers to, the mysteries of life. They use textual strategies full of gaps in an attempt to recreate unconscious processes, and they introduce crime plots that are not fully resolved. Indeed, this is the aspect – the inherently active questioning state of being in suspense – emphasized by the subtitles to so many of her recent story collections.

The rest of this article will focus on an earlier example of Oates’s writing, from a period in which she was not so much thought of as a writer thematically interested in crime stories, on one of her stories which is not obviously detective fiction, but might possibly be read as such.

“Slow”

Oates’s micro-fiction story “Slow” recounts a brief instant of domestic life in which a female character is worried by and reacts to what seems to be unusual behavior in a man whose house she shares. This economical account – only 224 words – effectively conjures up a suburban domestic scene through its evocation of a multi-story house (“upstairs window”), set back from the road and approached by a “driveway,” with a “garage” and a garden or lawn space bordered by a “scrubby evergreen hedge.” The first verbal structure, “returning home,” implies that the unnamed protagonists “he” and “she” are close, that “he,” at least, lives there, and that she, at least, has an intimate knowledge of his routine, enough so as to harbor certain expectations with regards to it. Though the story does not specify the couple’s relationship, and, indeed, there might be other explanations – housekeeper and client, mother and son, etc. – we easily make the assumption the protagonists are man and wife, the typical couple one expects to find in such an upper middle-class neighborhood.⁶

In such a short story, the use of repetition is all the more striking and calls attention to three of the story’s features: mystery, absence and experience of time. The initial adverbial phrase “the wrong time,” applied to when the man should be “returning home,” appears twice in the variation “wrong thing,” first concerning the absence of expected aural stimuli, and later concerning the man’s posture inside the car. This tripartite repetition of “wrong” plus “time”/“thing” communicates the protagonist’s confusion and effectively involves the reader in the mysterious frightening realm of the female character who is ineffectually grasping at

⁶ Commenting on the nature of this fictional form, Oates writes: “. . . the rhythmic form of the short-short story is often more temperamentally akin to poetry than to conventional prose, which generally opens out to dramatize experience and to evoke emotion; in the smallest, tightest spaces, experience can only be suggested” (*Sudden Fiction* 247). In “Slow,” Oates parsimoniously, but very effectively, “suggests” a clearly identifiable literary world for her character duo.

meaning. The negative structure “she doesn’t hear” also appears three times, insisting upon the jarring effect of the unexpected silence upon the protagonist, a sort of Oatesian “curious incident of the dog in the nighttime,”⁷ if you will. A third, appropriately, tripartite repetition is present with the word “slow.” In addition to its eponymous use, it appears twice in the story to refer to the speed with which the protagonist advances, suggesting that the effect of the events on the protagonist is intended by Oates as central to the story.

Oates often uses repetition in her texts to convey the passion of her characters and invest certain passages with a lyrical quality that sweeps the reader along with the tide. Oates’s repetition here reinforces the protagonist’s methodical quest for meaning which will finally be voiced in the ultimate word “why,” suggesting that this is indeed both the primary concern and the elusive desired element which will remain forever beyond the character’s, and the reader’s, grasp. Reading an Oates passage can often be quite a physical experience. This is the case here as Oates’s complex one 224-word sentence causes us to feel the slowing down of time along with her main character, mimicking a dreamlike experience of “pushing through an element dense and resistant but transparent like water” that seems interminable, but most likely occurs in the space of a few minutes. Indeed, the story is probably intended to depict a period which coincides with the time one takes to read it aloud.

Oates is parsimonious with punctuation in this story. She uses it sparingly, yet to great effect. The two sections in which commas appear – “and then there’s another wrong thing, it’s that she doesn’t hear the car door slam, she listens but she doesn’t hear, so she turns slow and wondering” and “though she doesn’t, as she makes her slow way to him, know how, or why” – place commas in proximity to the negative structure “she doesn’t” plus “hear/know,” reinforcing the hesitancy experienced by the protagonist at the realization of occupying unfamiliar and unexpected territory. Besides the final period, two sets of points of suspension are the only other form of punctuation. The phrase offset by these points of suspension, “he is in fact sobbing,” clarifies more precisely the man’s activity initially reported as “crying.” Thus, the points serve as a visual representation of the woman’s mental processes as she attempts to interpret the scene before her. They physically slow down the rhythm of this portion of the text even more, perhaps reflecting the woman’s mental pause due to shock, a brief inability to formulate words for the situation, or even a sensation felt by the character of time slowing down as the brain reacts to sudden frightening input.⁸

Oates’s use of action verbs such as watch, listen, go, continue and see; together with aporetic expressions such as “wondering” and “she knows . . . though she doesn’t . . . know”; combine to create the impression of a protagonist in the act of investigating. At the same time, though she is actively questioning and responding to aural stimuli, or rather the absence thereof, the aporetic “wonder,” in conjunction with the punctuation, adds to the feeling of mystery and presents the character as unsure and hesitant, yet determined to move forward. In this way, they highlight the opacity of the character’s relationship to the world, while at the same time acting as the catalyst for her behavior.

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⁷ A key piece of evidence in Conan Doyle’s “Silver Blaze” is the fact that the dog did not bark when the horse was stolen, thus indicating to Holmes that the culprit was someone with whom the dog was familiar. Here, the fact that the male character does not make the expected noises indicates to the female character that something is amiss.

⁸ This latter example is a scientifically documented phenomenon. See, for example, “Time slows down during accidents” in which Valterri Arstila discusses the science involved in understanding why “people who have survived accidents often report altered phenomenology including how everything appeared to happen in slow motion” (1).

I like to use this story during the first session of an introductory course on detective fiction. After providing students with a broad definition of the genre from the first page of *The Longman Anthology of Detective Fiction* – “Detective fiction is a literary genre, either in novel or short story form, dealing with a crime or crimes, usually murder, in which a detective or detectives seek justice for the victim and on behalf of society” –, I ask them to read this story and to decide whether or not they think it is detective fiction. There is not necessarily one right answer, so debate can sometimes be lively. A significant number of students respond that it is not, arguing that there is no detective, no investigation and no crime. It is simply a short account of a banal domestic incident. Other students get caught up on the length of the story and prefer to think of it as the beginning to a more developed detective story. Perhaps the man has committed a crime: murder, embezzling, ordering a hit, running someone over . . . Or he may have been the victim of a crime . . . Other options, which do not fit this paradigm, such as that he has engaged in behavior, such as an affair, that he regrets, or that he has learned of a death in the family, are never suggested by students.

Every once in a while, a student will see it differently and understand that there *is* no more as the story is a complete work in itself. If we shift our focus to the scope of this short story, it can be read differently. Yes, “Slow” *can* be read as a complete piece of detective fiction if we view it as a micro-investigation into a domestic incident. In this reading, the “crime” is the couple’s broken routine. The woman investigates, responds to clues and aural stimuli (or lack thereof). The problem is “solved” at the end when she arrives at the car and comes to a “solution”: their routine has not been respected because the man is deeply upset about something.

“Slow” is written in the present tense, which contributes to creating a feeling of immediacy. However, this does not prevent it from being constructed on a classic backward-looking structure of the type described by Tzvetan Todorov in his “Typology of Detective Fiction” as that typical to the whodunit, or classic detective fiction story. Indeed, two separate story lines may be identified, that of the crime and that of the investigation. The “crime” is identified in the opening line as “The wrong time for him to be returning home,” indicating the present consequence of an unknown past action which provoked it. The woman starts her “investigation” of watching, listening and gradually moving through the house and outside to the car in response to the discovery of this problem, as indicated by the use of the conjunction “so” in “so she stands at an upstairs window watching,” a conjunction which introduces a clause of result or decision. At the same time, the solution that the man has broken his routine because he is deeply upset about something is still unsatisfactory to many readers. In this case, contrary to what we have been trained as readers of classic detective stories to expect, the motivations behind the “crime” are largely absent from the story. We learn he is upset about something, but we remain curious about what it is that has upset him so. The reason behind the man’s crying, the resounding “why” toward which the story builds, is left untreated. We would like to know, of course, what it is that has upset the man so. Indeed, the question “Why?” is that which primarily preoccupies the protagonist and the final word towards which Oates’s methodical prose so painstakingly leads, so that it becomes our principal preoccupation just as the story ends, forever preventing any further explanation, and leaving us to forever wonder, in a typically Oatesian way, about the meaning behind the events depicted.

This information gap allows Oates to introduce an element of suspense into the story, as well. As we do not know why the man is crying and do not know “how” “their life will be split in two,” we might feel concern for the future well-being of both characters and share the woman’s fear that something emotionally painful is coming, communicated through the use of the word “split,” which reads here more like “fractured” than like neutrally “divided.”

There is something universal about this story. In *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*, Greg Johnson writes that Oates’s “particular genius is her ability to convey psychological states

with unerring fidelity, and to relate the intense private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life” (8). Indeed, nearly everyone can relate to the mystery of an unexpectedly broken routine on the part of a spouse, partner or other family member: “What is he/she doing home? I wasn’t expecting him/her so soon!” The fact that the protagonists remain unnamed, referred to only through the pronouns “he,” “him,” “she,” “her” and “they,” and the possessive adjectives “his” and “their,” makes it even easier for the reader to identify with them as universal representatives of contemporary humanity. The fact that the story is composed in one long sentence seems to help it convey the notion that it describes one small moment out of a rather ordinary upper middle-class existence. Such an effect of universality is perhaps more easily achieved and maintained in such a short-short form, which has been termed “sudden fiction” by the editors of the 1986 collection *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, in which Robert Shapard defines “sudden fiction” as stories not exceeding 1,500 words (xiv).

When asked about her personal view of her own aesthetics, Oates responds in a 2004 interview that she considers herself a formalist because she is interested in the forms and structures of fiction and language. We need forms to put our stories in, she says, adding “my work is always carefully calibrated” (Miller). She is very concerned with the length and symmetry of the sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters and parts that make up her works and she speaks of herself as being excited by forms in the same way that poets are excited by them. In a short afterword to *Sudden Fiction*, Oates writes: “The form itself is sometimes mythical, sometimes merely anecdotal, but it ends with its final sentence, often with its final word. We who love prose fiction love these miniature tales both to read and to write because they are so finite; so highly compressed and highly charged” (246). As we have seen, through its final word “why,” “Slow” insists on the importance of the quest for meaning and thus acts as a fitting mid-career synthesis of Oates’s career-long exploration into the “mystery of human emotions.”

Conclusion

As mentioned in introduction, Oates comes later in her career to increasingly write stories which might be labeled “*why*-dunnits.” Exploring the motives and repercussions behind crime and violence seems to be a primary concern of hers. In this light, “Slow” may be read as an elusive precursor to Oates’s more contemporary work.

In general, incomprehension drives the plots of Oates’s fictional pieces and the language and structural techniques she employs contribute to reinforcing these thematic enigmas. Rather than use detective fiction to demystify, Oates rewrites it to show that no event can ever be completely understood, no matter how talented the observer. Her mystery fiction shows us not how to solve puzzles, but how to accept the mysterious into our lives. “One can never come to the end of the exploration of the self by way of language. . . . Fascinating,” she writes at one point in her *Journal* (Johnson 85).

My experience teaching “Slow” provides anecdotal evidence that what Christol and Mathé have identified as part of the great American tradition in letters, the inconclusive ending (16), often makes readers uncomfortable. However, such stories continue to be written, read and appreciated. I wonder if, despite the fact that the more open endings of many works in short story format may leave certain readers uncomfortable, this feeling might not be counteracted in some way, albeit unconscious, by the reader’s recognition of a backward-looking detective fiction structure, which might somehow give the illusion of a solvable problem and thus provide a certain amount of emotional comfort, through the simple structure of the work. If this is the case, the evocation of the investigation then implies the existence of a solution. At the end of “Slow,” though we do not know what has pushed this man to a fit of sobbing, we are sure that a concrete, identifiable reason *does* exist, in spite of Oates’s writerly prerogative to leave us hanging on a sort of ultimate ghost chapter.

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