INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics

ISSN: 2835-1924
Volume 2 | No 4 | April -2023

The Fragrility of the "White" and the Grotesque of the "Black" Person in Joyce Carol Oates' Novel "Black Girl/White Girl"

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Abstract: This paper reviews the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates which can easily be placed within the framework of poetics in novels, which is part of the tradition of American literature. Oates is often seen in connection with Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and writers such as Faulkner and O'Connor. Oates' numerous novels—even those not explicitly considered poetic literature—often evoke a similar atmosphere, develop themes, and employ motifs and narrative strategies associated with poetic devices. They explore the dark side of human desires and the unconscious, and they feature grotesque and revolting plots, taboos and secrets, often linked to a person's personal past, but also linked to larger social issues. The connection between the personal and the social characterizes Oates' writing, and such a connection is also considered a defining feature of American poetics.

In Black Girl/White Girl, Oates uses the gothic mode. The novel is structured as a frame story told in 1990 by veteran white female history professor Generva (Jenna) Mead. Oates herself writes in her novel about the difficult situation in some American colleges where the hellish struggle is visible to the naked eye, and at Princeton College these problems remain invisible to human eyes. Jenerva (Jenna) Meade, who writes what she calls "in the service of justice," admits to being involved in the death of her college roommate, a young African-American woman named Minette Swift, daughter of a charismatic minister who is on a scholarship to a prestigious liberal arts college founded by Jenna's abolitionist Quaker ancestors, after one of whom Jenna is named. Unlike The Sacrifice, which also includes issues of racial discrimination, the bulk of the novel is a first-person retrospective account of Jenna's freshman year in 1974-75, a framed, objective narrative that focuses on Jenna's relationship with Minette, leading to a timeless Minette's death, but also includes Jenna's account of her strained relationship with her parents Maximilian Mead and Veronica Heuvet-Mead and her own childhood marked by cultural and political radicalism, as well as racial and privileged shame.

Like most of Oates' work, "Black Girl/White Girl" explores "American society, past and present, especially in terms of the distribution of power among institutions", primarily education and the family, of which this text is important. The novel lists important figures as protest and radicalism of the 1960s, such as the Black Panthers, Catonsville, Nine and the Weathermen, as well as moments such as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Watergate, and the resignation Richard Nixon. These figures are also associated with historical outcry, with the liberal commitment to racial equality and socioeconomic diversity presented as an extension of the founders' commitment to the abolition of slavery in the last half of the 1800s.

"Black Girl/White Girl" presents the college campus as a gothic place filled with history, and the dorm as a stage for mysterious and frightening events. The narrative also shows the transformation of characters into grotesques that are associated with social transformation. However, in Oates'

performance, the grotesque characters are far from comical: they capture "the confusion, the inconsistency, the seething heterogeneity of modern life", especially in the modern life of American race relations. [1,108].In an early scene where Jenna meets Minette and her family for the first time, not yet aware that they have been assigned as roommates. The way Jenna describes Minette's father, Virgil Swift, speaks of his possessive attitude towards his daughter and, in general, to his family, as well as the established family discipline: “At first I thought She has a father, he loves her. And then I thought She is the daughter. She is his"[2,31]

The revelation of Mr. Swift's character takes place in the subsequent actions, in the house of Elias Mead, the founder of the university. The Rev. Swift insisted on the opposite story, which attributes free rein and courage to African Americans, which destroys the guide's narrative. In a characteristic manner, Jenna observes in great detail and her agonizing thoughts are carefully recorded. «The guide stared at him blinking in surprise. A shiny-coppery-haired middle-aged Caucasian woman in a school blazer and pleated skirt, suddenly humbled as if stripped naked. You could see that she'd never before been challenged in Elias Meade House. The black man had addressed her with the air of one accustomed to authority, deference; the woman instinctively knew to defer to him, but her memorized words were of no help to her» [3,42]

In the US context, class and race are closely intertwined, and Jenna struggles throughout the novel with "white" privilege and "white" guilt. However, she often believes that she is made to feel guilty (poetics - a sense of guilt for whiteness): ““Minette had the power to make me feel guilty, no matter how unjustly”; the other students “were made to feel guilty” in Minette’s sight”. Wording like this suggests that Jenna is experiencing guilt as a form of what Robin DiAngelo, an American critic of whiteness discourse analysis, calls "white fragility." White fragility is a process that includes defensive responses to various manifestations of "racial stress" that white Americans can experience from simple actions and situations such as drawing attention to racial differences. These reactions include emotions ranging from anger to guilt and behaviors ranging from argumentation to withdrawal. While feelings and behaviors signal vulnerability, white fragility is actually "a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage". Jenna also oscillates between understanding the world in terms of race and denying the importance of race. On several occasions, she resorts to "colorblind racism," a form of post-Civil Rights racism that is more subtle and covert than before, but which works perniciously to defend racial categories and prejudice. For example, when Minette hints that she is being racially harassed, Jenna claims that the harassment may simply be because she tried to be hated: "Minette had made herself generally disliked ... for her fiercely outspoken and independent ways". In moving from group (African American) to individual (Minette Swift), race is removed from the abuse equation. Jenna later reflects on the meaning of Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" - a caricature of a fat black woman - that she finds tucked under the door of the suite she shares with Minette: "I would wonder if the act hadn't been purely personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not "racist." Yet how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial! As if, beneath ordinary hatred, there is a deeper, more virulent and deadly racial hatred to be tapped. In other words, the flashback begins with Minette's voice, a plaintive "Oh God," followed by the narrator's observation that Minette usually talks to herself, scolds herself, and prays out loud. Jenna describes Minette like this: “My roommate was standing with her back to me, oblivious of me. She was standing very still, as if paralyzed. Her head was tilted back at an awkward angle and she was staring at the window above her desk, where a crack had appeared in the upper half of the pane. Minette turned vaguely towards me, without seeming to have heard me. Her eyes were widened in wordless panic behind her childish pink plastic glasses and her lips moved soundlessly.

Minette appears here as a hysteric, and her appearance fascinates Jenna, who describes her face, skin and body in great detail, her "wedge" hair, "stiff and sticking out like wires, smelling of natural oils", her "waist, fleshy, thick" , and her "wide hips and sloping chest" strangely contradict her childish innocence. Moreover, Minette's dark body changes over the course of the story; she eats almost uncontrollably and gets fatter and fatter, her compulsive eating and hiding of her food supplies leads to an insect infestation in her college room. Her female body becomes truly grotesque, Rabelaisian,

transcending its own boundaries, and it absurdly and transgressively combines innocence with precocity, naivety with cynicism, in a way that implicitly calls for regulation and control, symbolized by her increasingly tight belt. . Minette's characterization of the grotesque body as "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with informal "low" or carnival culture, as well as with social transformation". In Minette's portrayal, gender, race, and class intersect to establish her difference and grotesque body. For example, because Minette is on a merit scholarship and her parents have less money than many others in college, she can't buy new clothes as she gains weight, and Jenna observes the "raw nicks made with scissors" in Minette's black leather belt. and her only good skirt, overgrown, buttoned with a safety pin under a loose pullover. These signs of her low economic status complete her grotesque image. However, this reading is complicated by the fact that Minette is so blatantly dehumanized in the novel. In the opening scene, her vocalization is a "half grunt/half groan", and her speech is usually rendered as campy ("Scuseme?"), aggressive, often incomprehensible: "Minette was a medley of irksome sounds: mutterings, mumbles, exaggerated sighs, humming, singing, and of course praying, grinding-teeth, occasional weeping." Her poor academic ability, religious fervor, and seeming low intelligence are another way the narrative emphasizes Minette's body rather than her mind. By the end of the framed flashback, when Jenna visits Minette in a private room at Stone Cottage where she was transferred due to alleged racial persecution at Haven Hall, Minette is ill, her body is oozing oil and smells of sweat, her room is dirty, littered with "dirty" clothes, the wastebasket is "stuffed" with used sanitary napkins that smell of gore. Although Jenna smells codeine in the room, she lights the many candles that Minette has placed in the shape of a cross. On the eve of leaving college, Minette becomes an utterly pathetic figure, eventually dying horribly in a fire that Jenna helped start.

Throughout the novel, Minette has been impenetrable to Jenna, and perhaps she remains "a mystery to Jenna." The text highlights the inability of liberal white subjectivity to transcend its position of white privilege. An important question Black Girl/White Girl poses is whether Minette remains a mystery to her readers, too. Oates uses a first-person narrator to convey and explore the "white" liberal consciousness in matters of race and class, topics she has explored repeatedly in her writing. For example, in the early story "Naked", Oates uses a third person to focus the mind of a middle-class white woman in liberal politics who is brutally and inexplicably attacked by a "pack" of black children who are trying to strip her naked and beat her up. Moreover, staying within this limited perspective and not trying to "speak for" African Americans can be interpreted as a form of respect for difference. (This view is expressed in Black Girl/White Girl in one of the fictional quotes from the works of Max Mead: "The wish to know another person fully is a way of appropriation, exploitation. It is a way of shame that must be repudiated") Something similar works in Black Girl/White Girl. Minette rebuffs or remains insensitive to most of Jenna's attempts to befriend her, and she is also characterized by indifference to others. But the narrative point of view does not provide an easy separation between Jenna's limited point of view and the author's point of view, leading to a repetitive description of racial differences and racist stereotypes. Indeed, as the story progresses, there is a growing sense that just as Jenna needs Minette to validate her progressive identity and her family, Oates seems to need Minette's mute blackness for the same reason.

The apparent escalation of harassment gives Jenna an opportunity to show her solidarity with her roommate without supporting others who accuse Minette of lying about the events. Jenna fixes Norton, a textbook that was stolen and littered with dirt, destroys a drawing of the racist "Hottentot Venus", cleans and repairs the found glove and, above all, protects Minette, increasingly against her better judgment. However, when she recognizes Minette's distinctive cut-out lettering of Minette's offensive message as the same typeface used in Minette's religious tracts, which coincidentally disappear from their previously conspicuous display in Minette's room, Jenna realizes that Minette has indeed faked her own racial persecution. This discovery is a turning point in the novel. The emphasis on Jenna's conscience and subjectivity remains, but the suggestion that Minette fabricated her harassment creates a very different reading dynamic. Readers are encouraged to be critical of Minette's actions and view the racially motivated hate crime allegations as a ploy to cover up lower academic achievement among minorities. Readers are also encouraged to remain sympathetic towards Jenna as a victim of "reverse racism" but question her lies in order to protect Minette. In

other words, the critical eye is directed away from Jenna's internal struggles with racism and interracial relations. Her early traumatization does, indeed, become more apparent from this point on, and Oates constructs it in such a way that Jenna's childhood memories rival the more immediate college and Minette flashbacks.

Jenna clings to the belief that her father never broke the law, just as she claims Minette is the victim, not the perpetrator, of the abuse. However, realizing that Minette fabricated hate crimes against her, Jenna also realizes that her father harbored violent political activists turned terrorists. A young man who attempts to commit "hara-kiri" (Japanese suicide ritual), Ansel Trimmer, survives and, it turns out, lives long enough to be involved in terrorist activities, including an explosion that killed an African-American watchman at the Dow chemical plant. The text is ambiguous about whether Trimmer commits suicide five years after the death of the watchman, but it is clear that he and others testified to Max's involvement in terrorist activities, claiming that Max was providing shelter to anti-war demonstrators suspected of bombings, as well as supplying funds for weapons, ammunition and explosives, as well as obtaining false identity documents for terrorists. As events in Haven Hall escalate, Jenna resists the urge to testify against Minette and instead finally secretly testifies to her father's guilt, effectively sealing his fate to a life sentence. The frame story has been noted to begin with the narrator admitting his guilt in Minette Swift's death. The untitled text, in which Jenna writes 15 years after the incident, is intended as "inquiry" and "intelligence" "in the service of justice": "Fifteen years! All this time, I have been alive. I have been living, I have even acquired a professional reputation in my field, and Minette Swift has been dead. I have been aging, and Minette Swift has remained nineteen. I am a woman of middle age, Minette is still a girl." Jenna feels guilty about covering up the facts to protect her name, protect Minette and her family, protect Schuyler College, and "to protect the white faces surrounding Minette." So even her particular guilt about not being forthright about Minette's death, including her own role in lighting the candles, is tinged with racial consciousness that extends into the epilogue, as well as where Jenna retained her black allure. women and where, as we learn, she refers to Minette Swift as "the sister" who died.

White Girl/Black Girl by Joyce Carol Oates also features socio-psychological themes such as racism, violence, sexual abuse, and the struggle for self-determination. One of the main elements of the poetics of the novel is the use of two main characters who represent different sides of the same coin - white and black. The author uses various symbols and images to convey the emotions and moods of the heroines. For example, the masks that the heroines wear in different situations symbolize their inability to be themselves and live their lives. The author also uses different colors to convey the moods and emotions of the heroines. White symbolizes purity and innocence, while black symbolizes gloom and danger. The poetics of the novel is based on the fact that the author shows us not only the inner world of the heroines, but also their environment. She describes life in the poor areas of New York, where racism and violence are a daily reality. She shows how these problems can affect the human psyche and lead to the destruction of the individual. Also important in the novel is the use of two main characters who represent different sides of the same coin. This allows the author to look at the problems of racism and violence from different points of view and show how they affect people's lives. In general, the poetics of the socio-psychological novel "White Girl/Black Girl" is based on the use of various symbols and images to convey the emotions and moods of the heroines. The novel explores the themes of racism, violence, sexual assault, and the struggle for self-determination.

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