

Chapter V

*Conclusions*

This study considers the various possibilities of interpretations of the short stories of Joyce Carol Oates from thematic viewpoint. It summarizes the various techniques employed in her narratives as well. Her stories reveal the distinguishing traits of postmodernist narratives, such as absurdity, discontinuity, or disintegration and the meaninglessness of life. Her most frequent themes were among others, the individual's fight against the nature, against the society and quite often against himself or herself.

A short story has multiple opportunities for experimentations. It is a significant medium for presenting complexities of modern life with all its subtle details. A writer can never be excluded from his work of art. Despite the popularity of "Reader-response" and multiple approaches to the study of literature, the social, cultural and to some extent the economic conditions still play a crucial role in the interpretation of a short story.

The study begins with the essential aspects of Joyce Carol Oates's life, education and literary career and the influences. It also consists of her critical reception in the literary world. The study of these events and incidents in her life provides an insight into the art and craft of the writer.

The second chapter chiefly concerns the emergence of the new and independent genre: The Modern American Short Story. It covers the elements and parameters of the short story such as plot, character, setting and point of view. In addition, it considers some of the most significant aspects of her style. Modern stories differ from the conventional structure. Experimentation primarily in plot, characterization, point of view and even in setting makes these stories distinct and remarkable.

Third chapter deals with the thematic aspects. From the analysis of her stories like "Swamps", "Pastoral Blood", "In the Region of Ice," "Free", "Accomplished Desires", it becomes clear that the most dominant theme in her stories is the "quest for self." In the story "Swamps", Oates depicts the predicament of a woman who makes frantic efforts to escape herself. She wants to get rid of her pregnancy. One of the significant aspects of this fight is that she even attacks her savior. She brutally hits the old man who saved her life and runs away. Oates projects her as an 'anonymous' woman. It supports the viewpoint that she wants to suggest that her predicament is universal. The woman suffers from the painful existence and the marginalization. It could be the fate of any woman who is caught in similar circumstances.

A similar manifestation of the quest for the self is in Nina's struggle in "Heavy Sorrow of the Body." She breaks away her relationship with Conrad and lives alone after her father's death. Her economic condition becomes critical but she does not go with him. The experiences of her father's death make her think seriously about her freedom.

The protagonist of "Free" is Lea. She is constantly at war against the false and baseless values of modern society. Her mother has a passion for antique things. Her passion to reconstruct the lost world becomes an obsession to maddening degree. She even deliberately ignores the deprivation of her daughter and especially her childhood. Lea was never allowed to play inside or touch anything in the house. Fed by this craze and the continuous deprivation, she leaves the house to become free. To escape even from the financial dependence, she rejects money from her parents and enters the profession of 'prostitution'. The story thus projects Lea's desperate struggle for identity. She suffers from the illusion of reality.

“Accomplished Desires” has many thematic implications. It comments on disintegration and loss of love in human relationships. Barbara Scott, a writer and critic of unequal merit commits suicide because she could not endure her husband’s indifference and lack of concern to her. There is another important theme, the jealousy. Dorie feels jealous of Barbara. She intrudes their life madly because of this feeling. She suffers from similar crisis. To her horror she finds herself caught in housekeeping and caring children. The loss of freedom makes her desperate and disillusioned. She becomes doubly cheated first by Arber and second by circumstances.

Love is the frequent theme in the fiction since humanity. It is the bond that keeps human beings together. It aims at integration. It is a powerful feeling. Love is that prime motif which inspires individuals to accomplish miracles. It appears in myriad manifestations in human relationships. It is a powerful force. In her *Wheel of Love and other stories*, its violent and disastrous aspects are clear.

“Ruth”, the title character suffers from rejection. Mr. Wreszin adopts her. She becomes dispossessed in spite of her innocence. Mr. Wreszin, a man of her father’s age involves her in an illicit relationship. She accepts him as her lover. But in their frantic attempt to escape, Wreszin’s car meets a tragic accident. He dies eventually leaving her disillusioned.

A significant theme in her stories is the love in different manifestations in human relationships. Nadia in “Wheel of Love” commits suicide because she no longer wanted the intolerable relationship with her husband. Instead of love it is conversely the love that drives her to commit suicide. She feels herself caught in the love of her husband. “In the Region of Ice” brings forth religion as an important hindrance in the passionate love. Allen Weinstein a Jew student

passionately loves a nun named Sister Irene. However, when she encounters Weinstein she finds herself caught in a dilemma of choosing between her vocation as a nun and human relationship.

Her conflict becomes intensely emotional as well as religious. But the love can not become successful because of her fear of "human relationships" unable to endure the disappointment, he commits suicide. Oates' continuous engagement with reality is found even in the love stories. Weinstein is a troubled personality. Oates here delineates the condition of a deranged mind yearning for love as well.

The story represents the sufferings of a young graduate student who involves in love with a nun. Unfortunately his passionate love for her remains unnoticed and one-sided. He often makes anxious and urgent remarks to attract her attention. But his passion encounters cold and indifferent response. She never understands his motives hidden under the veil of his anxiety. He protests against the existing system of society, morals and its impact on life.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" puts forth a question. Connie, a teenager becomes the victim of a psychopath named Arnold Friend. He threatens her to kill her family members. She finally yields to him because she has no alternative. He is in many respects similar to the "Misfit" in Flannery O' Connor's "A good Man is hard to Find."

In the "Ceremonies", an individual's fight against the powerful natural forces is clearly visible. Mr. Rockland brings a large farmland under cultivation. He yields great fortunes. However, one day a lightning strikes his barn and turns all his assets to ashes. He was proud of his achievements. He lives aloof and isolated from the villagers. Because of this people envied him. But all his pride comes down to earth in a single night. In the chivalrous fight of

individual against Nature, the powerful natural force always triumphs, turning everything upside down.

In another story entitled "Fine White Mist of Winter" a similar theme appears. A sheriff's best deputy arrests a young Negro and drives his car to the police station. But the unexpected blizzard turns all his plans to a trash. Suddenly he becomes a powerless victim of the natural disaster. He believed that the snowstorm would not last long.

Unfortunately, it continues and the dreadful feeling of death grips him. The blizzard transforms him from an authoritative and racist officer to a powerless and helpless victim of natural forces. To their delight, they discover a garage nearby run by Negroes. The Deputy asks for a shelter. The blizzard thus brings him down to the level of Negroes. Through him, the story projects two exactly opposite viewpoints. The story is full of dramatic irony.

Oates presents the perennial clash between Civilization and Barbarism. She herself admitted to Greg Johnson, her biographer that the stories "were written to demonstrate a certain theme or obsession I had at that time: the relationship between the individual and the unknown, whether unpredictable and uncontrollable forces himself or in other men or in nature."

Postmodernist theories such as post-structuralism, Post-colonialism and Marxism made significant impact on the themes of contemporary short stories. The years after Second World War marked the beginning of uneasiness, restlessness among the people. Modern narratives are influenced by these drastic changes.

Joyce Carol Oates frequently represents the theme of individuals suffering from existential crisis and their insatiable quest for identity. The

recurring themes in the stories are therefore the quest for identity or self, love in its myriad manifestations in human relationships and the perpetual clash between civilization and savagery. She highlights the deteriorating family and social relationships. She parodies the obscurity and cynicism of the modern world. She parodies the hypocrisy and absurdity in modern life.

The fourth chapter focuses on the correlation between the basic elements of fiction and various techniques employed in the stories. In her stories especially those discussed above, Oates employs various techniques to evoke the conflict between illusion and reality. Her early stories like For instance "Swamps", "Ceremonies" and several stories included in *By the North Gate* follow the traditional pattern. Most of the stories in this volume have the ironic fairy-tale-like beginning: "Some time ago in Eden Country. . ." The traditional pattern suits the conflict between old and new world.

Another essential aspect of her plot development is that many stories are segregated into different sections. It symbolically suggests the disintegration and deterioration of existing social order. The prominent themes in her stories are the strained or broken relationships and loss of innocence. The segregation of the stories in various sections aptly helps to depict the above themes. Oates occasionally uses the psychological way of narration. In the stories like "By the North Gate", "Accomplished Desires", "Free" and "A Premature Autobiography", the conflict discloses through a series of flashbacks or dreams. The analysis of these aspects necessarily facilitates the critical study of the narrative techniques in the short stories.

A crucial aspect of Oates's characterization is a technique of introducing another parallel character which has contradictory attitude or qualities. She employs this method to evoke the character's mood, disposition and way of

thinking heightened through another equally powerful character or a minor character. Her women behave in a strange and unpredictable manner. Oates highlights their abnormality in many stories. The apparent abnormality, however, implies their revolt against the marginalization.

Grace in "Pastoral Blood" for instance drifts into the maddening desire to ruin herself. They have suicidal tendencies. She portrays individuals involved in painful burdens of relationships from which there is no escape. She comments on the realistic aspects of such relationships in varied forms in her stories like "Heavy Sorrow of the Body", "Accomplished Desires", "In the Region of Ice", "The Goddess" and to some extent in "Wheel of Love" and in "Magna Mater."

Oates depicts the individuals leading extremely painful lives. The characters in her early stories testify this fact. It is because she portrays the evils of Depression she experienced in her parents' lives. They are caught in inescapable circumstances.

Her protagonists are not always essentially female. Male characters dominate in her early stories. They appear as shrewd, discreet and possessive. Female characters on the other hand, are rather detached. They largely suffer from loss of identity. They tend to drift into the maddening desire to ruin themselves. Many of them have suicidal intentions. In "Wheel of Love" Nadia suffers from similar existential crisis, she commits suicide because she no longer tolerate the hypocrisy of her husband veiled under his passionate love. Other aspects of these stories are setting, point of view and style. Oates's fictional "Eden" is modeled on the Erie Country of her childhood. She inserts vivid images to bring forth the bizarre aspects of the illusion of reality.



The setting encompasses the time, location and circumstances of the story. It is also known as socio-cultural milieu. It helps to render a peculiar tone to the story. The stories like "Wheel of Love" "In the Region of Ice" "Heavy Sorrow of the Body," "Accomplished Desires," and "Magna Mater" have the academic world with all its eccentricities as the central concern. The setting of "Heavy Sorrow of the Body" is an apartment in a city. Modern short stories often have psychological settings. Oates depicts the painful existence of the people of 1960's leading a strenuous life. It is evident even from the atmosphere as evoked by the setting. "Ruth" opens with the description of the dying trees and the swamps in wreszin's farm. They are symbolic of meaninglessness of life. Most of the Oates's stories are set in the "Eden Country." to sum up, she reflects on the socio-economic, cultural, psychological and religious aspects in her stories. Her later stories are set in suburban life modeled on Detroit.

Style makes a writer successful in his accomplishments because it is individual in form. It can not be taught or learned. The study of the style of the writer, however, gives the reader a peep into the writer's mind. She employs imagery to suggest metaphorically the thematic patterns in her stories. In "Pastoral Blood," essentially a story about a woman's war against the social cultural and ethical confinements, she employs an image of a mechanical girl in a jewelry store. The "mechanical girl" has several thematic implications. In brief Oates's stories are the unique representations of stark reality. She satirizes the absurdities of American life.

To put it briefly, the above study will considerably help those who wish to explore different possibilities of research in the area of "Modern American Short Story." The stories provide valuable judgment on the contemporary American reality and the universal sufferings of mankind. Understanding and

awareness of recent literary theories develops a kind of insight essential to the research student. This dissertation will at least direct him or her to investigate the possibilities of research especially in modern short stories.

Moreover short story plays a crucial role in introducing the nature and scope of fiction in the graduation level courses. The study will facilitate to selection of appropriate short stories to give the students a comprehensive picture of reality and the current developments in the modern narratives. In addition, it will help to improve better understanding and interpretation of the short story.