

Chapter III

Thematic Patterns

- I. Quest for self
- II. Love in its myriad manifestations
- III. The clash between Civilization and Barbarity

This chapter studies the recurrent themes in the stories of Joyce Carol Oates. Her most appealing stories appeared chiefly in her prominent collections namely *By the North Gate* (1963), *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* (1970) and *The Goddess and Other Women* (1974). Stories in these collections are highly intriguing and full of intense passion. They have multiple thematic implications. It records the struggles of people living in the merciless and hostile world, struggling desperately to define their identity. Her essential task is to present universal struggle of mankind in most indifferent and utterly unpredictable circumstances.

Her stories have wider thematic implications. She writes chiefly about the social problems like violence, racism, and the exploitation or marginalization of the women and the victimization of the weak.

I. Quest for self

Oates frequently represents the theme of individuals suffering from existential crisis and their insatiable quest for identity. She highlights this quest in her stories like "Swamps", "Wheel of Love", "Free" and "Pastoral Blood." She presents her women as the representatives of this struggle. In "Swamps" for instance, she presents an anonymous woman struggling desperately to become free. The woman is arrogant and ill-mannered, but her aggressive and rebellious nature is emblematic of her eagerness to get free.

Her stories reflect the characteristic traits of postmodernist narratives, which David Lodge summarizes as "Contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, Randomness, Excess and Short circuit." He distinguished between two modes of *post-modernist* writing the "polarized clusters of attitudes and techniques: modernist, symbolist, mythopoetic, writerly and metaphoric on the one hand; anti-modernist, realistic, readerly and metonymic on the other."¹ both these modes of writing are clearly visible in her stories.

The most dominant theme is the relentless quest for the self. Her protagonists continuously engage themselves in the struggle for the self. Grace, Lea, Nora, Claudia, and the anonymous women in “Swamps” and in “Premature Autobiography” are all involved in this quest for self. Greg Johnson speaks about her first collection as:

Most of the stories dealt with Eden country’s dispossessed citizens, narrating in swift, suspenseful prose their hard and sometimes violent struggles. Like Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. Joyce’s Eden country clearly represented her own postage stamp of native soil, its bitterly ironic name suggesting a microcosm of the economically deprived and psychologically troubled humanity he wished to explore.²

“Swamps” is the first story in *By the North Gate*. It depicts the theme of quest for freedom. It primarily centers on an anonymous woman. An old man finds a young girl in a very critical situation. The burden of her pregnancy overwhelms her. One day she was sitting down on the bank of the brook near the school. She behaves like a madwoman, “swearing and throwing bits of dried mud at them when they got too close, which led to their throwing mud back at her.”³

The grandfather approaches her and finds that she is pregnant and is unable to move. He brings her home in spite of her rudeness. The story deals the troubles of her pregnancy. She feels no gratitude for this goodness, instead she swears at him. She wants to end her life, to kill herself to get rid of the pregnancy. It is symbolic of her victimization. She is trapped in the circumstances. The woman resents sympathy and has apparently suicidal intentions. It is clear from their conversation:

“You goin’ to drown yourself?” said the Grandfather.
 “This is the free country”, bawled the woman. The boy could see her yellowed teeth and a great part of her tongue.
 “You an’ them goddam kids go on away an’ let me be. I got a right to sit here all I want.”
 “You goin’ to sit there all night too?” the Grandfather said angrily.

“You get up! C’mon, get up!”
“I ain’t getting’ up!” the woman yelled.⁴

He makes all the arrangements for her safe delivery. The woman hates any such kindness; perhaps, because it implies dependence on someone. She wishes to liberate herself even at the risk of the self- destruction. Yet the woman feels no gratitude for the old man. She hates him for bringing her to his house. She wants to escape not just from the burden of pregnancy but from the burden of her existence.

The story thus suggests an equally significant aspect: the struggle of the woman to define her identity. She wants to commit suicide in order to liberate her soul from the confines of her body. The pregnancy seems to have been imposed upon her. It makes her to resent her own body. It is evident from:

The woman began muttering at once, without glancing around. She did not even move her eyes. You give me that god dam knife, old man”, she said. “Then I’ll be done with this fast enough. You give it to me, old man. You miserable old whiskey bastard.” She went on to say other things, bad things.⁵

She kills her baby immediately after the childbirth. It is because she wants to escape from this new identity as a victimized woman. She hates this objectification, making woman as an object to fulfill male desires. Her behavior seems unpredictable and abnormal. But underlying this apparently strange behavior, there is an insatiable quest for identity.

The baby becomes a hindrance to her freedom. Rearing a child becomes an awful burden for the mother when there is no one to care about. The woman might have similar views. It threatens her freedom. She is consequently the victim of unwanted pregnancy. The story points out the social vulnerability of a woman. She is caught in the circumstances from which she makes an urgent escape. She runs away by drowning her child.

The old man might have dreamed a peaceful and happy life with the baby because he keeps saying till his death: "They robbed me, they robbed me;" It shatters his faith in the goodness of human heart, in the virtues of compassion brotherhood. She takes nothing valuable. "She never took nothing but the knife an' some pennies you had in a sock." The boy's father would say impatiently. "She never took nothin' else." ⁶ The story ends abruptly on a bitter note.

Moreover it records the murderous reality of America during the 1960s. The woman feels no intimacy to her own child. For her the baby is the symbol of her victimization. The story is gripping from beginning to the end because of this theme. It presents the marginalization of a woman from which she makes frantic efforts to escape.

The woman kills her baby by drowning it in the river. The impetus of this merciless behavior is perhaps in the socio-economic circumstances of the time. She wishes to liberate herself from all possible constraints. She kills her baby because it is burden to rear children. To a certain extent, it hampers her quest for freedom, for independence.

"Pastoral Blood", another story implies similar theme. The central character of the story is Grace. She belongs to an affluent class. She wants to escape from the eternal fear of getting victimized or even killed by some unknown criminal. Even her name itself suggests that she is beautiful. She was aware of her beauty:

She saw herself appraised in the eyes that approached. "Pretty girl! The work of centuries, civilizations, to bring forth such a product: pink painted fingernails and toenails, aloof complacent chin, a walk that sang of health and youth." ⁷

Yet she leaves her house apparently with suicidal intentions. Suddenly she has a vision, "As if the scene were in a movie, she forced it to be played back so the thought came unmistakably to her again: she no longer cared to

live.”⁸ This sudden revelation has many implications. She is going to marry with Tom after seven days. She belongs to an upper middle class. Even her fiancé is good-natured person. There appears no reason why she determines to destroy herself.

However she wishes to escape from the burden of her aristocratic existence. She throws away all the accepted social norms and ethics. Her revolt springs from this attitude. The rebellious nature is clearly suggestive of her desire to escape, to liberate herself. Moreover, she believes that marriage as a perennial obligation from which she would never escape, never be free. She listens to her inner voice and leaves the house immediately. Her mother reminds her about forthcoming marriage, but now it makes no difference to her.

“It’s only six days to the wedding, counting today. . .”
 “But what has that to do with it?” Grace laughed. “You just wanted it said! Just wanted it said! Six days to the wedding.” And she felt nothing at all, exactly the same way she felt while reading the headlines on the death page of the newspaper.⁹

Grace behaves mysteriously unpredictable. Oates presents her as the representative of women who are caught perennially in the social, cultural and moral confinement. She makes a frantic effort to escape even at the risk of self-destruction. It becomes a kind of spiritual struggle. She wanders along the road and comes across an expensive jewelry store where she finds a mechanical girl displaying a diamond ring. The girl looks beautiful, pure and surprisingly human. She compares herself with her:

Grace looked up at the mechanical girl with her thick lashed eyes and coquettish lips and her proud gigantic diamond and in that instant both girls recognized each other.” How strange she should be the last to see me alive!” Grace thought.¹⁰

She imagines that she is similar to the mechanical girl. The mechanical girl can not move herself. She is an object displaying a merchandize. She has a fixed purpose and a fixed existence. She is symbolic of the purity as well as

futile existence of the woman. Instead of buying from expensive stores, she enters in a cheap store, not because she wants to save money. She feels overwhelmingly uncomfortable with refined aristocratic life. She feels that her life is bound to end in a suffocating confinement.

Her journey rather leads to destruction. But she wishes to recreate her own identity. The story also envisions her predicament as a woman wishing the self-liberation. Grace is the representative of the individuals caught in the fixed existence, leading life mechanically without any purpose or aim.

She buys new clothes and immediately leaves the store. Even changing the clothes is symbolical. She already decides to transform her being. She wants no memories of the past, not even her clothes which make her aware of her aristocratic background. She eats in a roadside hotel. Once again she has the tormenting thought about dying:

How strange she should be eating at all, enjoying this half-stale doughnut – perhaps it was a mistake to die when doughnuts were so good, even in a coffee-pot-like diner like this, with flies circling dazedly overhead... Perhaps it was a mistake, too, to leave without saying goodbye at least to her mother and Tom.¹¹

But she feels no regret because she determines to die. She deliberately undergoes her degradation in the hands of unknown men. She drives her car to north. This aimless journey is actually symbolic of her quest for self-liberation.

She decides to liberate herself from her wearisome existence through self-destruction. She was aware of the ensuing danger. She picks up a hitchhiker. He is a middle-aged man. The man learns that she is alone in the car and must have been troubled by something. He warns her about the dangers of picking up hitchhikers on lonely highways. But she seems to pay no attention. “Nothing will happen. What could they take from me that I wouldn’t want to give?”¹² She fears about nothing. She allows the strangers to take the control

of her body. Her degradation is suggestive of the debased morality of the time. She has no regret that the man was not Tom, her fiancé. She could feel nothing.

But the self destruction does not stop here. She again picks up three hitchhikers. They were boys of about twenty. One would guess from her behavior that she is insane. "Such Women", according to Greg Johnson "develop strategies of withdrawal and manipulation when their perception of physical life, especially sex, has become a proven or potential threat to their own integrity of self."¹³ Furthermore she makes no protestation against her gang rape. She experiences failure in achieving a complete self-destruction.

When she regains her consciousness, she finds herself admitted in a hospital. The experiences of her seduction bring no change to her determination; except that she becomes more detached and impersonal about herself. Following is the vision in which she imagines herself in third person:

The girl in bed will reassume her role, Grace knows, give her but the words to do it with, the correct glances. Time can be nursed, there is all the time in the world; give her time to be freed time to arrange for another escape, another light.¹⁴

Soon after regaining the health, she will begin her quest again through perhaps more dreadful way. This is evident from last sentences of the story: "All the time in the world, and the next time there will be no failure. In another year, perhaps. Experience is the best teacher".¹⁵ The last line is suggestive of the strong motifs of Grace to bring herself to a tragic and dreadful catastrophe. In the end, she appears on the verge of madness in her search for truth. She fails to realize the hostile and cruel world around her. She goes to extremes to define her existence.

"Wheel of Love" features a woman named Nadia who overwhelmed by her husband's love commits suicide. It begins with David's memories of Nadia when she was alive. The story is told in a series of flashbacks. David recalls his wife who committed suicide. He reflects on her anxiety to die as she once said

to him: "Everyone is like me! They want to have other lives, be other people. Don't tell me. If I have to be just one person I will kill myself."¹⁶ She imagines herself as caught in the confinement of the love.

They loved each other passionately. It continued for several years. But now she has a sudden realization that she is caught in a perennial confinement of his love. She wanted to escape. She wished to retain her identity not as a wife of someone, but as an independent woman. Her husband loves her, but the love becomes a burden for her. Even David admits that:

A wife was a kind of possession and no husband thought that way until something went wrong: there were things in life you had to have, to possess, you had to be able to depend upon. He tried to explain this to her. but his love was the anchor that held her down and kept her safe, no matter how far away she went.¹⁷

It chiefly reveals his hypocrisy. In fact through love he confined her. Nadia discovers it after fairly long time that the love is conditional. Nadia disliked this objectification. This affects their relationship. She finds him dishonest beneath the surface of his passion." She hates things that confine her. The story therefore represents her quest for identity. The discovery that her husband only confines her under the veil of his passion makes her more vehement and eager to get free.

She wants to escape from him because she hates to become an object of his desires. She makes several efforts, but it is his power of love that holds her back: "He loved her and he was not going to let her go. For six years he had been strong enough always to draw her back, and he would be able to save her."¹⁸ Overwhelmed by this emotional captivity, she finds the only alternative to get free from it. She commits suicide. The story represents her struggle as quest for the identity. Throughout her life she brooded over the meaning of her existence.

The prevailing theme of “Heavy Sorrow of the Body” is the woman’s struggle to search the meaning of her existence. It is in other words her quest for the self. There are two major characters in the story: Nina and Conrad. Nina works as a teacher in a public school. Her job is temporary. She dislikes this temporary position. Similarly Conrad is a confused scholar and a novelist. He is unable to find his aim. The story records the aimlessness of life of both the individuals. Both of them are struggling to define their identities.

Nina once loved Peter. But now she discovers his possessiveness: “he said he needed Nina, but Nina couldn’t understand how anyone could need anyone, let alone her.”¹⁹ She hates this objectification or treating women as objects of male desires. She complains to Conrad because:

He had the cool, transfiguring look of a sculptor, eyeing material- she complained that he was always looking at her and thinking about her as a object, and she wanted nothing more than union- a continual closeness a magical intimacy.²⁰

The story concerns the lives of these two individuals: Nina and Conrad. Both of them were the victims of loss and guilt. They lost their identities. But they do not worry about their aimlessness. They decide to live together without marrying. Conrad is also a troubled scholar. He failed to accomplish anything worthwhile in his life.

He had a self assured strong face. Yet he himself was not strong. His life was confused and energetic and without purpose. Now he was studying history, and his intention was to be a historian. He believed that historians had always lived in the past. He had his own theories of history.²¹

Conrad has taken divorce from his wife. He does not want to marry again. Like Nina he is also careless about future. When they decide to live together for a year, they discuss on the issue of marriage. Conrad’s views were: “I can’t imagine anything that temporary”, he said. “I’m really monogamous, I have a monogamous soul. It’s just that marriage repels me, the papers and the

blood test, and it does nothing for love.”²² He could not bear such a temporary relationship but he is helpless.

The story delineates the disintegration in the familial relationships and deteriorating social order. Nina is unable to achieve a permanent position because of the controversies in the educational system. The story ends with Nina's triumph, she retains her inner self. She breaks off her relationship with Conrad because it is based on lust and not aimed at intimacy. Oates, however, presents disastrous aspects of love.

Her individuals are involved in painful burdens of relationships from which there seems no escape. It is because as Stuart Sim warns us: “Sentiment represents the emotional response to a world beyond our control; a recognition that the ‘nice and subtle question concerning the personal identity’ defeat all of us in the end.”²³

“Free” projects a similar theme of the quest for self, through Lea Gregg, a teenage girl. She belongs to an affluent class. Her father is a doctor. Like the many protagonists of Oates's stories, she is also troubled by loss of identity. Her attitude is in contrast with her mother's passion for antiques. Her mother always tries to recreate the world of the past. It becomes an obsession with her. It makes Lea's childhood miserable. Even the title of the story itself suggests the theme.

She struggles against the baseless manners and values of the modern life. She hates every kind of dependence. In fact she has an obsession for independence. Her rebelliousness reveals her quest for the self. She becomes neurotic to escape from this world of confinement. She also consults a psychiatrist about this disorder in her life: She replies to Dr. Joris:

My childhood? Yes, I had a childhood. I had a Siamese kitten. It was declawed. It tried to scratch the furniture, oh, it was hilarious

to see that smooth little cream-colored cat paw desperately at the sofa and scratch, but nothing happened.²⁴

The above description suggests Lea's condition. She is almost similar to the "kitten" because she can not hurt her mother. Her mother has peculiarly suburban passion for authentic furniture. She spends huge money for antique things. Lea wants to run away from this world because it suffocates her. She can not bear it any longer. She reflects: "In a way I loved them, I don't know. But I had to get out. I had to be free of them, and not just free of seeing them, either, but free of them completely."²⁵

The house or the family is a confinement for her. It is based on assumption that the parents force her to do things even though when they are not willing to do them. Lea broods on her parent's house:

All houses were the same. They closed you in, they confined you, trapped you. It was maddening. She promised herself that never, never would she own a house; never would she own anything. She wanted nothing. She wanted to be free.²⁶

She wants to run away from this world. She can not bear it any longer. She leaves her parental home in desperation to become free. She encounters various men. But her relationship could not last long because each of them recognizes her emotional dependence: "But you, Lea, with your terrible emotional dependence, you could never be free even when you appear to be free. Because you're always preparing yourself to latch onto someone else, someone stronger than you."²⁷

She attempts to explore several relationships in order to be free from this emotional dependence on men. She enters into the profession of prostitution. Yet she feels no guilt because she will not become emotionally attached with those impersonal men. One day she meets Terry, an instructor in a university. Both of them have similar views on freedom. But eventually their relationship comes to a breach. The story ends on a tragic note. In her struggle to become

free, Lea experiences a complete breakdown. Her rebellious nature is evident of her struggle to achieve independence.

The self-destruction is in essence a self liberation. It is another representation of quest for the self. It is evident from the discussions between Lea and her friends: "Because, of course, what had seemed to be a breaking down was in reality a building up, but before any building could take place the clutter of twenty years of buried life had to be violently swept away."²⁸

"A Premature Autobiography" is about the dispassionate love affair between Herbert Breuer a famous musician and his anonymous student. Instead of well-conceived, "beginning, middle, end" order, it follows an inconsistent segregation of events. It has no chronological sequence: the reflections, sensations and frustration of the individuals preferably come to surface.

As the story deals with lives of musicians, each section comes as musical symphony, a harmonious relationship between sensations, emotions and expectations: "From a room on the second floor comes the sound of a violin, a piano, a violin. Stop. Begin again. The two sounds together, beginning again and stopping. For music there is always time— forever. Space stretches. Time stretches."²⁹ The story has no order. It is symbolic of the inconsistencies in modern life.

In "Magna Mater" Nora Akenside is a successful academician and a critic. She suffers from strained familial relationship. The only setback in her career is the divorce. Her busy life has an inevitable consequence. It is the loneliness of her nine-year old boy, Dennis.

At the age of twenty seven she published her doctoral dissertation, written at Harvard, on the poetic of Eliot, a 500 page work, heavily footnoted, which had as its thesis the vision of the poet as transcendent – triumphing over personality, over the limits of the body itself. She had been offered excellent positions in the universities. She married Theodore Drexler at the age of

thirty. She loved him very much. Whatever has gone wrong in their relationship had not been on the surface from her side... but it was pointless to think about it.³⁰

Most of them were jealous of her achievements. The story deals with an incident in her life. One afternoon, Mason Colebrook comes with his wife to her apartment. He is quite unexpected there. It surprises Nora. But she is somewhat delighted to welcome them as she nearly lost her social life after her divorce. Dennis's possessiveness and his hysterical behavior further made her aloof. Suddenly Colebrook's begins swearing and abusing Nora.

The story reveals through the hallucinations of Dennis. She suffers from his eccentric behavior. His hallucinations which Dr. Guber, the psychiatrist recognizes as the result of their broken marriage. The story deals with the crisis, a successful woman faces while trying to define her identity. Nora always seeks to maintain good social relationships. She believes that people around her were trustworthy. And they admired her. However, she was under a wrong impression.

He often interrupts her when she speaks on telephone, even though it is important. Sometimes she finds absolutely no solution. She appoints Dr. Gruber to treat his strange behavior. Nora feels that he craves for her attention and resents her professional life. Nora chiefly suffers from his hysterical and abnormal behavior. He has become so possessive. Dr. Gruber analyses his condition. Dennis's psychological conflict manifests through hallucinations. The disintegrated familial relationships, her busy professional life, the lack of fatherly love all these factors together led him to become hysterical and intensely possessive.

Dennis seems to be too much dreadful of Nora's social relationships. Colebrook eventually gets drunk and begins accusing Nora as "selfish, sadistic". He was evidently drunk. His wife was unable to control him. In fact he is the man Nora admired most in her life. It was painful to see him behaving

in such a manner. To her dismay he behaves contrary to her expectations. Nora believed that it was because of his drunkenness.

To him she is always a cynical woman. The truth thus comes to surface. But she was not prepared to face it. His wife finally comes to her rescue. To escape further humiliation, they hurriedly leave the place. The story points out the aimlessness and disillusionment of contemporary society.

Nora leads her way in spite of these circumstances. However, Mason Colebrook makes the final blow to destroy her moral integrity completely. Nora feels betrayed again because Colebrook was the man she somehow believed. His rudeness and the indifference shatter all her beliefs. It destroys her last ray of hope. The story delineates Nora's sufferings and her constant struggle against the indifferent circumstances.

"The Goddess" the title story depicts Claudia who suffers from similar existential crisis. Her husband Alfred is a highly egoistical man. He works in a pharmaceutical company. She accompanies him during one of his business trips. They come to stay in a hotel. She suffers from tormenting loneliness during such visits. They visit art galleries and return late at night. On their return, Alfred discovers that his briefcase is stolen.

This incident of the theft is the center of all conflicts in the story. But the hotel authorities neglect his claims. He demands urgent investigations. Hotel authorities conversely suspect Alfred's honesty. It annoys him. So he calls the police. But the inspector comes very late. He begins similar enquiries, completes his formalities and leaves the room.

Exhausted by the psychological tensions, he goes to sleep. During these climactic happenings, Claudia remains detached and impersonal. The story describes a very trivial incident. However the writer has broader aims. Claudia suffers from her husband's persistent pride and egoistic attitude. Like many protagonists of Oates, she imagines a similar destruction not a building up. The

story is about her marginalization. It points out the deterioration of modern life. Alfred her husband is highly egoistic and self-centered. The story has several themes implied by various dream-like visions, Oates projects throughout the narrative.

II. Love in its myriad manifestations

Love is the persistent theme of the fiction since the emergence of first piece of fiction. It is a powerful force that drives individuals sometimes to perform miracles. It is a bond, a vital feeling that keeps human beings together. It appears in several manifestations in Oates's stories.

The central theme of her *Wheel of Love and other Stories* is the love. The stories in this volume represent the violent aspects of love in human relationships. Oates explores the aspects of such relationships in varied forms in her stories like "In the Region of Ice", "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", "Accomplished Desires," "Wheel of Love" , "Heavy Sorrow of the Body" and to some extent, in "The Goddess."

The first story in this volume is "In the Region of Ice." It is about one-sided love affair. It is based on violent relationship between Irene and Allen. She views in this story the inseparable aspects of individual- the religion. Religious beliefs and their intensity often determine an individual's course of life. She wishes to explore the degradation of religious institutions and their fall both morally and intellectuality.

Sister Irene "is a tall, deft woman in her early thirties. What one could see of her face made a striking impression – serious, hard gray eyes, a long slender nose, a face waxen with thought,"³¹ She has chosen to lead a pious chaste life of a nun. Another major character is Allen Weinstein her young

Jesuit student: He was young but did not look young. There were harsh lines on either side of his mouth as if he had misused that youthful mouth somehow. His skin was almost as pale as hers, his eyes were dark and not quite in focus.”³²

He was anxious to propound his revolutionary ideas. He was disallowed from his previous history class, because of the inconsistent and controversial ideas in his master’s thesis,” some frank things, only a broad-minded person could hear could hear about himself. “That takes courage, right? He told Irene.”³³ Irene allows him to her class because of his reformatory zeal. He argues about the contradictions in philosophy and literature.

The prime motive of becoming a nun was according to Kennelley is to devote “to prayer, contemplation and the sharing of revelations for the good of the church, as well as to the care of the sick and needy. They and the heroic virgin martyrs of ensuing decades laid a foundation for a theology of virginity rooted in scriptural and quasi scriptural traditions.”³⁴ Irene determined to lead a passive and austere way of life. She obviously belongs to one these traditions.

She realizes slowly that he is eccentric and on the verge of madness. Yet she forgives him. Thus the story chiefly focuses the unsuccessful love affair between Weinstein and Irene. Under the guise of her authority and her religious position, she tries to hide her his passionate urge to unite. She never makes it clear what goes on in her mind. On the contrary she, of course, never denies it. He encounters cold indifference.

Irene encounters his aggressiveness. He speaks emphatically: “We must demand a logical consistency,” the young man said.” The idea if education is itself predicted upon consistency, order, sanity-.”³⁵ This somehow delighted her. She felt that Weinstein will be successful in English studies. Convinced by his revolutionary perceptions, she allows him for the English class.

Weinstein always believed that “Ideas are real.” But for Irene conversely: “only reality is real” This gives rise to the controversy. Weinstein’s ideas have multiple implications. It seems that he is against the human race, culture and ethnicity or against every aspect of humanity. Irene shows enormous patience. The reason might be that she gets involved in him. But her religious position would never allow her. She wants him to achieve something worthwhile in his life unable to comprehend the indifference and to survive in such circumstances without love, he commits suicide.

When for a long time he never appears he class. Irene begins to feel anxious to know his whereabouts. Ensnared in his own web; he begins to make excuses, telling convincing lies. She waited for him impatiently. She accepts his late papers the next day. It was entitled, “Erotic Melodies in Romeo and Juliet by Allen Weinstein, Jr.” Yet she is unable to comprehend his views. He was passionate about everything. He appears insane, troubled or confused. Irene gets involved in him but she could not make a decision to choose between religion and human relationship.

A daily terror attended this knowledge, however, for she sensed herself being drawn by that student, that Jewish boy into a relationship she was not ready for. she wanted to cry out in fear. That she was being forced into the role of a Christian, and what did that mean? what could her studies tell her? what could the other nuns tell her?³⁶

The theme of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is as the writer herself declares, is allegorical. Greg Johnson recounts the origin of this story as: “In early March Joyce had picked up a copy of *Life* magazine and began reading an article about Charles Schmid, an Arizona Serial killer of teenage girls”³⁷ Oates drew inspiration for this story from this article. There are two major characters, Arnold Friend and Connie. Arnold Friend is apparently modeled on Charles Schmid.

The story presents the victimization of a teenage girl named Connie. She lives a licentious life. She experiments with sex. But she comes across its horrible aspects when one day she finds two boys come to her house. She was bewildered to see that they are rather men of about thirty.

All the family members were out at aunt's house. She feels it a dreadful invasion. Although she was bold and cared nothing about such nonsense. She slowly realizes that they together made her a victim of their desire. She could not move about without their permission. There remains no alternative except to yield to him. The central theme is the victimization. Connie, a teenage girl is the protagonist of this story. She becomes the victim of the molestation from a man with criminal intentions.

In the end Connie surrenders herself to Arnold Friend, Perhaps because she has no alternative. He promises her that if she surrenders to him, there will be no harm to her family members. She understands her fate. Her sacrifice suggests the love for the family members. It also represents the theme of familiar relationships. The story also records Oates's autobiographical experiences of the 'Erie' country of her childhood. The barbarity of Arnold Friend is the result of the socio-economic conditions of her time. The story is modeled on the serial killer, "The Pied Piper of Tucson." She describes him as:

The Pied Piper mimicked teenagers in their talk, dress and behavior, but he was not a teenager he was man in his early thirties. Rather short, he stuffed rags in his leather boots to give himself height. He charmed his victims as charismatic psychopaths have always charmed their victims.³⁸

Oates further calls it an archetype because it actually exists in everyone as an unfulfilled desire to make others victims. The story is highly symbolic. It is as Richard Gilman puts it, a story about disastrous aspects of love and sex. Arnold Friend, a psychopath victimizes a young and lonely girl. Her struggle is universal. Arnold or the psychopath is one of the symbolic threats to a female body.

The story, "Ruth" is an exploration into the violence of passion as well as self destruction. It is the story of the passionate love between a married man named Mr. Wreszin and Ruth, a teenager. The end the story, leads to a scene of accident. The story achieves power and originality in its depiction of the concluding scene. Wreszin learns from intuition that he will never escape from his past. He decides to leave the place and to begin a new life with Ruth. He wants to become free. He was aware that he could not break the rigid confinements of society.

"Accomplished Desires" is about a seemingly stable relationship between two writers Mark Arber and Barbara Scott. Barbara is superior to her husband because she won a Pulitzer. They have years of close relationship. Brenda Daly related the story to the relationship between Shirley Jackson and her writer husband Stanley Hyman:

"Accomplished Desires" transforms into fiction certain details of the marriage of Shirley Jackson and Stanley Hyman, which ended in Jackson's Suicide in 1965. Jackson's biographer, Judy Oppenheimer, does not hold Stanley Hyman fully responsible for his wife's accomplishments – both are writers but only she has won the Pulitzer – that motivates him to replace her with a younger woman who is less to his male ego.³⁹

Dorie Weinheimer, a girl student intrudes his life. It brings a sea-change in their relationship. Barbara interprets their closeness correctly. She finds that Mark deliberately ignores her. Moreover, the feeling of jealousy grips her. She cannot decide whether to accuse Dorie or to Mark. But her heroic nature makes the correct choice. She asks him directly about the divorce: "If you want to marry her, go ahead. I won't stop you."⁴⁰

She feels sympathy for Dorie. She experiences feelings of withdrawal because of lack of love. It is a kind of emotional death. She feels humiliated because Mark leaves the decision to her whether to accept Dorie or to reject her. Instead of getting embarrassed he reminds her tactfully that:

“I had thought” Mark said with dignity, “that you and I had an admirable marriage. It was different from the marriages of other people we know— part of it is that we don’t work in the same area, yes, but the most important part lay in our understanding of each other”⁴¹

His emotional attachment with the girl is questionable. He makes the girl a vehicle to accomplish his desires. Unable to bear the betrayal, Barbara finally commits suicide. The story suggests the disruption or disintegration of familial relationships. The relationship between husband and wife becomes a burden because of lack of love.

Compared to Arber’s achievements as a writer, critic and university professor; Dorie is almost nothing. The story is about her marginalization. After Barbara’s suicide she takes care of her children. She had to work all day because Mark’s visitors come without notice. Dorie feels trapped by the inescapable circumstances. The story ends tragically in her confinement.

The title story, “Wheel of love” bears an epigraph from Stanley Kunitz’s poem “Lovers Relentlessly.” The lines also suggest the theme of the story. “Some must break / Upon the wheel of love, but not the strange, / The secret lords, whom only death can change.”⁴²

It has powerful theme: the love between husband and wife. The love is merely an instrument for David with which he confines her. However, he loves her passionately, Nadia cannot trust him. She makes persistent efforts to become free from it.

She desperately yearns for freedom. She wants to escape from the constraints of her relationship with David. She argues with him on this issue: “David, look,” she said “I know how you feel. I know. But what about me? I keep thinking of going away of going to strange places . . . can’t you understand that? You’ve never tried to understand it.”⁴³ It is perhaps the power

of his love that stops her. But David's love appears on a superficial plane. She always wants to run away; to enter into a new world.

The love he felt for this woman was a condition he existed in, the way he existed in a world of gases only accidentally fit to breathe. He needed this love for survival, but it would never have occurred to him to be grateful for survival, but it would never have occurred to him to be grateful for it or to feel any affection for Nadia, beneath the surface of his passion.⁴⁴

He uses Nadia as the object of his passion. This makes her to become indifferent to him. She remains neutral to his attempts of expressing affection. She could no longer endure his love, his power to prevent her from getting insane. She learns that he confines her under the veil of his passion that he is a hypocrite. She could not bear the truth and commits suicide. The story comments on lack of genuine love in familial relationships.

“Heavy Sorrow of the Body” begins with the description of a scene of disorder. It symbolically suggests the confusion of Nina. Further the description of the surroundings is “the larger, more vacant lot outside the window and the factories that ringed the city, a heavy poison not to be escaped.”⁴⁵ This description also indicates her confinement. It also depicts her character. Nadia loves to be free, liberated from every constraint, even from the emotional dependence.

However, soon she realizes that like Barbara, she also becomes only the object of his desires. Her role sadly limited to a housekeeper. A sense of the loss of identity overwhelms her. She realizes that he is using her as a ladder to climb up onto academic and literary success. He dislikes disruption. One day exhausted by the terrible burden, she breaks out. “She began to cry and had to leave the room and the two guests and Mark and even the children were displeased with her.”⁴⁶ He feels perpetually caught in this situation from which there is no escape.

Initially she loved Peter, but now she dislikes even to think about him. She attracts towards Conrad because he lacked the possessiveness of Peter. He is detached and impersonal about his relationship with Nina. He is frank. He even advises Nina to marry Peter:

So if you want marriage and a house and all that, it isn't too late to get Peter back. Oh, the hell with Peter, Nina said, the hell with respectability and security and dull, deadly niceness; what she wanted was Conrad with his dirty feet and his profanity, even if he was a bastard, she gave them a year together, one good year.⁴⁷

But Conrad fails to maintain an intimate relationship with Nina. Nina feels the outer world spiritless and clumsy. The lack of love or intimacy is one of the prime reasons of broken relationships. His failure has many implications. He is perhaps the victim of broken relationships. He is unable to maintain the harmonious relationship with Nina. He also lacked the purpose of living.

She decides to live with him for a year but not longer than that because she can not bear the attachment. She wants to understand him. But it turns out fruitless. Conrad remains similar to other men, possessive and domineering which she disliked. A final breach in their relationship comes when one day she receives a letter from her father. This letter clarifies the central theme. Nina's father becomes seriously ill. He wants her to see him. The letter annoys her because she hates her father.

She could not remember him or perhaps never wants to remember him. The story has the prominent theme: the love-hate relationship between father and daughter. She becomes angry because her father lived alone and never cared her. She hated him for his indifference toward his only daughter. This also enfolds another theme: the relationship between father and daughter. After several years of loneliness a father wants to see his daughter. She goes to him in spite of her hatred towards him. It is perhaps because of their blood-relationship.

Throughout the long drive she thinks very little of him, as if he is a stranger to her. She finds him helpless and in pathetic condition after several years. She understands the paternal love. She feels ashamed of her indifference towards him, to his painful last days. She thinks of death and the painful life of this dying man. The next day they take him to hospital. The story ends ironically when Conrad comes to Nina. He tries to convince her for a long time. She refuses to give in. Finally he feels the futility of his argumentation.

“He understood that her power was stronger than his, or his body understood, for he did not try to make love to her, used only words in his bitter argument with her. And finally he said, on his way out, “Stay here! Good by! So if you are crazy. I at least got back my car!”⁴⁸

Thus the story highlights the love as a perennial force which keeps individuals together. The love brings the daughter and father brings together.

III. The clash between Civilization and Barbarity

The postmodernist or contemporary writings represent to a large extent, an oscillation between tradition and modernity. Oates stories demonstrate similar traits. Her early stories are traditional in form. However, she ironically presents realistically the uncertainties of modern life. The powerful natural forces, economic insecurity together contribute to destroy the essential humanity. Greg Johnson observes:

More generally, the stories convey Joyce’s vision of a barbarous natural and social reality. In Eden Country, she portrays the agrarian “old world” of her North Country heritage as it clashed with a fearsome modern world marked by a rapacious industrialized economy and an absence of moral principles. Beleaguered by poverty, Joyce’s people live out their violent struggles against an indifferent, often cruel natural landscape.⁴⁹

The woman in “Swamps” belongs to the eccentric, brutal modern world. She wanted to run away from the old man’s house because even the goodness

of his heart was a kind of restraint on her freedom. The Grandfather belongs to the old world and retains all its ideals of pity, compassion and humanity. The clash is therefore between the two cultures; two diametrically opposite viewpoints.

The loss of innocence is also another theme of the story. The woman who appears on the bank of the river is pregnant. She endures the painful condition but still she detests compassion shown to her she swears at the old man even though she comes to her rescue:

The woman began muttering at once, without glancing around. She did not even move her eyes. "You give me that god dam knife, old man," she said. "Then I'll be done with this fast enough. You give it to me, old man. You miserable old whiskery bastard."⁵⁰

This indifference towards the savior and denial of any help suggests her self-respect and passion for independence. She lives for week with the old man but never develops any healthy relationship with him. Instead she leaves him shocked, before and in dissolute condition. Her departure conveys a sense of loss.

In spite of her swearing and irritating behavior, the old man says nothing. He takes her home even though she was not ready to follow him. He takes every care for her safe delivery. "About three O'clock, the grandfather himself appeared. He stomped right into the barn, showing no surprise at all that they were all sitting there. He was carrying a newborn baby and his hands and shirt front were bloody."⁵¹

She rather chooses to run away, to begin her life afresh elsewhere. She shows downright cruelty in killing her own baby girl. What makes her to do that? To be so much brutal? The motive of this brutality appears in the Darwinian struggle for existence. The woman wishes to survive, but never dependent on anybody. The family might have adopted her baby and she would

have led a safe and peaceful life with the old man. The old man's disillusionment seems emblematic of his old age, the loss of innocence.

An intense personal experience inspired Oates to compose "In the Region of Ice." It is modeled on Richard Wishnestsy, a troubled graduate student of Oates similar to Allen in the story. Allen could not bear the dispassionate and hostile reality. He fights against the intellectual, religious and moral degradation of the modern world.

His only hope is to a treatment as a "human being". Instead he receives shock treatment because his parents declared him deranged or insane. Tormented by these constant tortures he commits suicide. The story thus projects the perennial clash between Humanity and Barbarism. It is a clash between the two cultures; the "Old humanitarian world" and the brutal civilized "new world"

Mr. Rockland is the dominant personality in "Ceremonies". He achieves tremendous success in his life. His hard work and scientific way of farming make him one of richest man in the town. He buys acres of land and cultivates it. However, he was very proud and indifferent to other townspeople. The first part of the story introduces Rockland as a successful but highly prejudiced and isolated person. He never meets other peasants and always remains aloof. Nobody dares to ask him anything or initiate a conversation with him. They envied him for his "aggressive anonymity." And his excessive pride in himself.

He did not come to borrow anything. He never remained for long in the tavern, where out fathers waited for him to address them; his wife failed to appear; nothing happened. We heard rumors of what he was planting, how many acres he was trying for, contradictory rumors, but none o them dared to touch upon his private life. ⁵²

The increased productivity brings great affluence to Mr. Rockland. The villagers turn hostile towards him probably out of the jealousy. A successful

farmer, the affluence makes him aloof and indifferent. He refused to be social for some unknown reason. One summer the villagers plan an activity: to organize a volunteer fire company. They succeed in raising enough money to buy a fire engine.

Rockland obviously refused to join the organization. Perhaps, he believes himself to be safe. But unfortunately he fails to realize the brutal and indifferent forces of nature. He represents the new world civilized and therefore utilitarian. The story also envisions the triumph of the new world. It points out the rapid transformation the old world undergoes.

His sudden intrusion in this world leads to many transformations. The townspeople suspect his achievements, felt jealousy and envy. He continued to yield rich harvest because of the hard work and his agricultural knowledge. His thirst for power is clear. His aggressiveness brings the envy of the townspeople:

As the years passed, Rockland steadily acquired more land. The ritual of his attending church each Sunday had drawn his closer to us, but rumors of his achievements, his plans, still came to us with the air of speculations from a distance land. Settlements annoyed people most, for they felt in a peculiar way doubly spited – by his ability to make such enviable transaction, by his seeming lack of underlying selfish motives.⁵³

One day lightening sets one of his barns on fire. People came to extinguish the fire both out of excitement and out of genuine sympathy. The peasants gather round the barn. They begin to save things:

The fire truck finally emerged up at the top of the hill. Firemen jumped down from it – neighbors, friends fathers, old men, all transformed now by big black helmets and the professional look of hand axes that must have come along with the truck. They shouted for out help and so we added to the confusion, running around and chopping at the base of Rockland's massive barn with those toy sized hand axes, while others struggled with the coiled hose.⁵⁴

The confusion, lack of good fire engine as well as lack of co-ordination among the volunteers leads to the complete destruction. Everything in the barn burns completely. The fire also burns his house. The struggle against the powerful forces of Nature becomes futile. The barn and the house which once stood symbol of affluence power and pride, turn out a complete devastation. Nature ruins everything within a few moments.

But the villagers help Rockland to build up again. The story ends with one might call "a happy ending." Rockland's pride leads to his ruin. He fights against natural forces, in which Nature triumphs. Humanity also triumphs once again because the townspeople help him to build up. He gets back his identity as an affluent farmer. The story has also another underlying subplot: a story within a story. Elizabeth Rockland fails in love with Tom Kramer. The fire rather fuels their love.

The central theme of her stories is often the struggle of man against the Nature. The manifestation of this theme chiefly appears in "Fine White Mist of Winter." The story is a brilliant study of the struggle against the brutal and indifferent forces of nature. There is a white deputy; a police officer named Rafe Murray who encounters a harsh snowstorm. He was traveling by his car with a Negro boy named Bethl'em Aire. Caught in the circumstances they seek shelter in a nearby garage run by two Negro brothers.

The storm brings two diametrically opposite races, cultures and viewpoints under one roof. During their stay Rafe Murray feels insecure and uncomfortable. He is the only white person inside; the other two Negroes might also kill him. Oates proceeds with the universal conflict between Humanity and the savagery of the modern world in this story. Rafe Murray experiences the intensity of this conflict for the first time in his life. He curses the weather.

Bethl'em can not move because Rafe tied him tightly with a chord. He takes the prisoner to a warm shelter inside the garage. But to his surprise there

are another two black men. In spite of the extreme racial hatred, the Negroes save Murray's life. It is perhaps their belief in humanity which saves Rafe from being killed in the storm. There is an air of uneasiness and great psychological tension.

The Negro brothers implore Rafe to release Bethl'em. They tell him about an incident of racial hatred happened with one of them. On their return the Negro explains Rafe how he was once the victim of the white race cruelty. He narrates him the extreme cruelty of the whites:

“They sic'd the dogs on me once, had them chase me for fun down by the crick; I wasn't fifteen then; they chased me a long ways. I kept runnin' with them right on my legs an' somebody tole the sheriff an' he come to see me himself an' ast about it, an' looked sorry, but there couldn't be nothing done Why, I never needed to knife no man first, did I?”⁵⁵

The above extract reveals the downright cruelty and racism of the white people who torture a Negro boy just for fun. The story brings to the surface the age-old conflict between humanity and barbarism. Rafe fears the Negro brothers and is skeptical about their intentions. On the other hand they make him realize that in spite of the barbarity, they saved his life.

Placed last in the collection, “By the North Gate”, the title story represents the clash between two worlds. It deals with Revere, an old man's nostalgia for the old world.” He had been dreaming of the past again that night and his dream had been fragmented and confused, like pieces of jigsaw puzzle spilled across his mind.”⁵⁶ The story deals with another minor theme: Man frequently in combat with the society, with the world. His name itself suggests the theme. There is a fragmentary dream-like sequences of the visions of the past.

Old Revere, the central character remained his past. He recalls how his wife died. He has no remorse about his past. He is fighting against death. He

views it like a series of pictures moving one after another. His loneliness is the central theme of this story. Revere lives alone on his farmland. His failing eyesight and his loneliness together make his old life miserable.

How weak his eyes had become! Revere know what his land looked like, so he could fill in details that were how blurred and gone; but he could not really see them. or the grass either. It was made of millions of little stalks, moving in the wind, but to Revere it looked like a solid green river.⁵⁷

Revere's troubles worsen when someone sets his farm on fire just for fun. He takes great efforts to extinguish it. The next day the farmboys torture his dog named Nell. The incident makes no great difference to Revere. He thinks over and tries to find out a motif for such cruelty. The farmboys represent the downright hostility. They finally kill his dog to add to his troubles.

His loneliness becomes more troublesome after the dog's death. The story centers on Revere's predicament in the highly hostile world. It projects the conflict between the old world humanity in combat with savagery and unintentional violence of modern world. Revere recalls his schoolteacher. He remembers how the young man took great troubles to teach him after so long: "he had never read a word until he was thirty, and only then when the schoolteacher had taken such pains with him, acting serious all the time, refusing to give in and laugh at a grown man doing a child's lessons"⁵⁸

However, the schoolteacher disappears from the town because a boy hits him. The incident once again asserts the same clash between two cultures. It appears that there is no place for the weak in this new world. Conversely Revere remains calm and composed in spite of the persistent violence directed to his hound. He recalls his son Will. The poverty and unemployment drive them to the city in search of work. Frank also runs away but for another reason, he murders his rival in a knife fight.

In brief the violence and the cruelty of the new world is constantly in mortal combat with the ideals of old world. The humanity triumphs in spite of highly indifferent circumstances, the growing barbarism and man's futile attempts. The recurring themes in the stories of Joyce Carol Oates are therefore the quest for self, love in its myriad manifestations in human relationships and the perpetual clash between civilization and Savagery.

To Oates, however, it is the disaster or violence to live together and maintain emotional integrity. Emotional violence is perhaps more painful than physical violence. She presents the realistic aspects of love which appears in myriad manifestations in human relationships. The love takes the form of possessiveness in "Heavy Sorrow of the Body." In it there is also the theme of death is central force that drives people to melancholy, despair and frustration.

In conclusion, there are several clearly identified themes running parallel in her stories. She reveals the individual's struggle for existence or the universal quest for identity. In addition, the love in its myriad manifestations, human relationships, disintegration and broken marriages, a woman's predicament in the highly hostile and indifferent social circumstances are some of the most frequent themes in her stories. One of the primary characteristics of contemporary writings is that it reproduces the inconsistencies in the life. Oates reveals these aspects in her stories. The reality is multi-dimensional and chaotic in nature.

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