

Chapter IV

Narrative Techniques

- I.** The Plot
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This chapter covers the narrative techniques in the short stories of Joyce Carol Oates. She makes radical experimentation in the form and content of her stories. She employs various techniques to bring forth the reality. This chapter studies the relation of these techniques to the various elements of short story such as plot, character, setting and point of view. In addition it studies the use of imagery and symbolism and certain essential aspects of her style

I. The Plot

Some of her early stories follow the traditional narrative pattern. "Swamps" is the first story from her collection *By the North Gate*. It has the conventional stages of development like exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. The exposition introduces characters, the central theme and the plausible reasons of conflict. It begins with an old man who is highly optimistic and enthusiastic to help the poor and needy.

The Grandfather who in his time had been a blacksmith for the area, schoolteacher when the big boys used to chase every other schoolteacher away, chief and truck driver for the volunteer fire company, the hero of uncertain, romantic exploits in the Navy (almost sixty years ago), and an excellent farmer, neighbor and parent."¹

His old friends used to visit him. Billy, his grandson sometimes accompanies him after school. Oates ironically presents the old man's optimism in the insecure and brutal world of 1960's. The second stage is rising action. It begins with a complication. One day the boy finds a woman sitting down on the bank of the river. She was pregnant and obviously needed help. Her pathetic condition arouses sympathy in his heart:

She was heavy, heavy-armed, with thick neck and a broad, bovine face. The boy saw with surprise that she was not so old—may be nineteen, the same age as his sister. She was sitting on the creek bank with her big legs out before her, her feet in dusty shoes pointed across the creek to the swamp on the other side,

looking so heavy, that the boy thought that she might not be able to move.²

In spite of her swearing and quarrelsome tone directed to humiliate him, he decides to take her home. She was unwilling to go with him. The action of the story keeps rising after this incident. The family members criticize the old man. This annoys his son too. But he could not say anything in front of his father. The neighbors also question about the girl's moral integrity. The issue of morality and ethics becomes a topic of suppressed discussion. His family members thought him insane. He still liked to lead an isolated life.

This incident brings a sudden transformation in the story. Once the boy's sister argued fervently with Grandfather, when he brought her home: "At least I ain't havin' a baby with no husband!"³ Even she was curious about the woman's fate. The family members understood her painful existence. After a week she gives birth to a healthy baby girl in the old man's house.

The childbirth somehow resolves all the conflicts. It brings a change in all the members especially in the boy's father. He becomes cheerful and caring. As the boy perceives "that the next morning there was something strange in the air when he came down for breakfast— even his father smiled, tousling his hair, and asked him if he'd had any funny dreams last night."⁴ Everyone in the family felt a similar change.

However, the things again turn out indifferent and out of control. Oates here introduces an element of suspense: what will happen next? When everything is resolved happily – the woman gets relief from the burden of pregnancy and the family is also ready to accept them. Billy along with his sister and mother decides to visit Grandfather's house. However, to their horror, the scene was different:

When they went inside they found the Grandfather lying on the cluttered floor, and a thick board next to him. The boy knew at

once that the old man had been hit with it because there was a blood-edged bruise on one side of his face.”⁵

This shocking incident is the point of highest dramatic tension in the story. The climax appears when the woman runs away, drowning her newborn baby. They find the old man badly injured and thus unconscious. He might have tried to stop her. After this incident the story gradually moves to resolution. This is also called as “falling action.” It moves toward a logical conclusion.

The story can be summarized in brief: an anonymous woman encounters a tragic fate by falling prey to the male desire. She becomes pregnant. She decides to commit suicide. An old man comes to her rescue even though both were strangers to each other. The story ends on a tragic note. A mother kills her own baby, attacks the old man, her savior and runs away leaving him betrayed.

“Ceremonies” has similar stages of plot development. The story opens with a grand funeral of an influential personality named Mr. Rockland. He leaves a powerful stronghold on the minds of the townspeople. It was as its title suggests, an occasion of celebration for them. It is clear from the description with which the story begins. Like the previous story, ‘Ceremonies’ is set in Rockland, a small town in the fictitious “Eden country.” It has the conventional beginning:

Some time ago in Eden country, in the town of Rockland, the old man for whom the town was named finally died, after seventy-odd years of antagonistic health and two or three months of something the women called the “heat exhaustion fever.” His funeral was celebrated in a grand, solemn and slightly self-conscious manner, attended by all the townspeople as well as country people never glimpsed in town between Saturdays and by children released from school for the occasion.⁶

The funeral becomes an auspicious occasion for them. The description serves as an “exposition” to the story. It has all the characteristics of the traditional plot structure. The setting is revealed through names of places like

“Eden Country” or “The town of Rockland.” It throws a considerable light on the personality of Mr. Rockland as well. It centers on the lives of Rockland family.

The funeral introduces the townspeople, their temperaments and Rockland— both the man as well as the town. The incident is a flashback on the life of Rockland. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Rockland is at the centre of the story. He leaves a prevailing impression on the minds of the people. Compared to the other stories of Oates, the story has longer beginning. She devotes lengthy introduction to reveal the temperaments of various characters, their motives, intentions and the setting.

Rockland is the representative of aristocratic class. He comes to stay in the small town and buys acres of land suddenly. He owns a big barn and a large house. With his scientific farming, somehow he achieves great success. He soon becomes the center of attention among the townspeople. However he never speaks with anyone. He makes no attempt to share his thoughts. As a result soon his success becomes an eyesore. Farmers become jealous of him.

He has three children, twin boys and a girl named Elizabeth. They were also proud and self conscious. To introduce his daughter Elizabeth, Oates here introduces an incident in her school. The seemingly innocent girl encounters the whim of her partly insane teacher. She aggressively escapes from his torments and shows her real strength. Tom Kramer her only friend comes to her help, although their friendship is not so intimate. The incident was like this:

Elizabeth, at the back of the row, suddenly clapped her hands and giggled aloud. Everyone looked around. “How’s he say Sioux!” She laughed “Can’t even say Sioux! Sioux!”

Mr. Berkman, who always pronounced the word in two syllables, “Si” and “ox”, was taken by surprise. “Why, Elizabeth Rockland,” he stammered. As he watched, his astonishment

turned slowly to anger and then to hysteria. He began shouting so offensively that the girl looked frightened.⁷

However, the girl escapes by shouting and abusing at him. She runs away leaving everything topsy-turvy. Her twin brothers accompanied by Kramer boy together make the teacher run away. The next day, however, Rockland himself comes with his children to apologize Mr. Berkman. He asks Mr. Berkman to apply punishment. The twin boys tolerate the severe blows of his willow whip. Elizabeth however, Once again displays the courage of disrespecting him even in front of her authoritative father. The incident was like this.

She put out her hands out indifferently. I think I saw a sudden twitch of her lashes as Berkman raised the stick and then her eyes were open, her gaze upright and bold, and she grabbed the stick away from Berkman and slapped him madly about the shoulders with it. "Old nasty thing! Old nasty alliterate teacher!" She cried Berkman defending his face and protesting, stumbled backward.⁸

Thus, the above incident in the school initiates further complications. It introduces the nature and temperaments of the major characters. Rockland's fortunes keep continuously rising. But he refused to be social. The peasants feel jealous of his achievements. But this jealousy never takes any extreme form of downright envy. Every villager is powerfully driven by his spirits and patience. He deliberately maintains this aloofness. His aggressiveness is perhaps the result of the affluence. His children show similar characteristics:

He did not come to borrow anything. He never remained for long in the tavern, where our 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 of these dared to touch upon his private life.⁹

The story has another subplot. It is the love between Tom Kramer and Elizabeth. He offers her a kitten on her eighteenth birthday. Overwhelmed by

this sudden and unanticipated love for the first time in her life she behaves strangely. She goes inside and brings a .22 rifle which her father gave her in the morning. She offers it to Tom. The strong-willed girl finally breaks out:

“What do you want from me?” she asked. “Why did you give me this? Did anyone else but my father give me anything? Did they?” we saw she was crying; we did not know where to look. “Me on my eighteenth birthday! On my eighteenth birthday!”¹⁰

The above incident shows her real nature. It discloses the secret of her arrogance and the rebelliousness. Beneath her arrogance, there is an earnest desire to become independent of the confines of society. She secretly yearns for love.

Tom Kramer is the one who understands her longing for love and consideration veiled under her arrogance. Their relationship remains obscure for many days. The fire in Rockland's farm brings a twist in their relation. The townspeople help the Rocklands to build up again. Elizabeth finally marries Tom. Their marriage shows the intense love until that time concealed. The love remains a mystery for many days. It unveils from people who spread rumors.

The major complication comes in the story when there is a sudden flash of lightening which sets his barn on fire. People come to extinguish it. Somebody calls a fire brigade. But as it is peculiar to villagers, their lack of proper co-ordination and fire brigade's delay together contribute to the complete destruction. The fire also reaches his farmhouse and burns it completely. But the unity of the townspeople is powerful. The incident reveals that their vital efforts could not save his ruin.

The story retains traditional plot structure. It has ironically a happy ending. It is because a proud and self-conscious man meets a tragic accident, a fire eventually brings his complete destruction. The fire makes him homeless and desperate. But the villagers help him to restore, to regain his status. It is not

just out of sympathy. They help him as the member of town, therefore the part of their lives.

“Pastoral Blood” is about a woman named Grace. The story opens with her suicidal intentions. One day she has a sudden revelation: “She no longer cared to live”¹¹ Instead of linear plot structure, Oates represents a psychological struggle in her mind. She leaves her parental house in desperation and aimlessly drives her car to North. She determines to bring her destruction with her own hands.

Although she belongs to an affluent class, she hates her background. She is preoccupied and careless. However, underlying this selflessness, there appears an insatiable thirst for the self liberation. She wants to liberate herself from her body as well as from her cultural confines.

She picks up a hitchhiker. He was a middle-aged man. He understands from her behavior that she is alone and no one will follow her. He makes her the medium to fulfill his lust. But the experience brings no change in her. She involves herself in a similar trouble. She again picks up three hitchhikers and drives her car speedily. She imagines about her house and family members.

“And what would they be thinking at home”, Grace wondered. The first hints of lean first speculations”, she said she was going. But she told me....you mean she didn’t? Her curiosity ended there nothing her mother or Tom could say interest her, she could write their dialogue for them.”¹²

Her thoughts reveal that she has an inclination to destroy herself. On the highway a group of blacks make her the victim of their lust. She undergoes the pains of a gang rape. When she comes to consciousness, she finds herself in a hospital. In spite of these painful experiences she still retains her desire to ruin herself to bring her degradation, even when she finds herself among the loving family members.

The story has a swift action. Grace's aim is not just self-destruction. It is rather self-liberation through self-annihilation. It is a spiritual journey. The conflict is largely psychological. The climax comes when the girl endures the gang rape without any apparent feeling of guilt or pain. The story also suggests the theme of distortion of moral and ethical values.

"Fine White Mist of Winter" deals with the story of the racist Rafe Murray, the sheriff's deputy. It opens with a flashback. He reflects on an incident in his life that happened thirty years ago. He comes to a sudden recognition: "He was thirty-eight and with man grown sons behind him; he had his eyes opened that day; he was born on that day"¹³ He with a convicted Negro Bethl'em Aire face a snowstorm. They were almost losing their way because of the ever increasing storm.

The Negro was mysteriously at ease. He meets no anxiety, nor any sort of fear of death. Rafe on the other hand keeps cursing at the bad weather and the snowstorm which confines him. He is unable to move. They somehow find a garage to have a shelter till the storm ends. He enters the garage. To his surprise he finds other two Negroes in the garage.

The story has little complication. It begins when Murray along with a Negro prisoner get caught in snowstorm. In the beginning he believes that the storm will not last long. But it continues with more fatality. They were still in the car. Bethl'em says nothing. Murray becomes anxious to save himself from the storm. He leaves the car. He finds a garage and takes Bethl'em, Negro prisoner with him. To their surprise another Negro opens the door.

With her rare gift of swift and fluid narration, Oates creates great psychological tension in this story. It is because the racist deputy is caught first in a snowstorm and later among a group of Blacks. The second confinement is more embarrassing for Rafe because he is the only White person among them. He finds himself caught between the vicious circle of this majority and the bitter cold outside.

Rafe realizes the danger. The story concentrates on the Rafe's racist beliefs. His superiority loses its stance when he finds himself the victim of the circumstances. He undergoes feelings of transformation. The story ends on a sarcastic note. Rafe's transformation is momentary. The last two lines are ironical: "Murray thought that some time before very long. Surely in a minute or two, he would again continue on his way."¹⁴

The title story "By the North Gate," records the memories of Revere, an old man, Oates employs "psychological realism" to depict the memories, sensations and emotions of the old man. The story begins with a flashback, an intervention in the past. He dreams about his deceased wife, of his childhood and of the schoolteacher.

The story lacks the conventional plot development. Instead it is told in a series of dreams and memories. Revere lives alone and has the only companion, a hound named Nell. He is fed up by the tedious and isolated life. This evokes the theme of loneliness in the story. But Revere never gives in. He struggles against the death. He is sixty eight now. He bravely endures the painful loneliness. One day he experiences a skillful act of violence. It increases his loneliness. He finds that Nell, his only companion is brutally tortured. The incident was like this:

When he opened the door the door the dog crawled across the threshold to him, shivering: Hey, what's wrong with the hound? Too cold for you?" he laughed, but then his laughter stopped. He stooped and saw what was wrong: The dog's ears had been slit, neatly and viciously and were now crusted with dried blood.¹⁵

The incident makes him awestruck. He begins to doubt everything. The vicious act of violence was not spontaneous. It appears skillfully planned. Its purpose therefore is not just to torment the poor soul, the old Revere.

However, he is not pessimistic even though he experiences a series of shocking incidents. The story comes with a series of flashbacks. The memory

of the farmboys blurs. Later on he broods over it in order to discover the reason for it. But soon his attention shift to another incident. He recalls how painfully he learned to read and write after years of illiteracy. He broods over his struggle.

To the wavering abstract pictures of the boys that remained in his memory, he shouted, "You come back! Come back here! All my late I done battle against it: that life don't mean nothin'! That it don't make sense! Sixty-eight years of a battle, so you come back! You listen to me! You ain't goin' to change my mind now, an' me grown so old an' come so far. . . ."¹⁶

Revere envisions the past. The loneliness brings no change in his views about life and death. He is proud of "having cheated death at least one more day"¹⁷ In brief, the story projects the theme of loneliness largely through the memories of Revere. It depicts his past life. He recalls how Nancy his daughter asked him once to live with her. She wanted him to live with them in Pools Brook. But he refused saying: "I wouldn't know how to start over again in another house!"¹⁸ He feels his existence as an inevitable obligation.

There is another vision. He recalls a schoolteacher once taught him patiently how to read and write. He learned to read with great pains almost thirty eight years later.

So much time wasted. He used to go over to the school house after the children left, every afternoon, and the school teacher- a young man afraid of the big boys – would talk to him and show him books with colored binding, with gold letters in a glass case at the front the room."¹⁹

He recalls his children; Frank and will. The story thus concerns the inner conflict of Revere. It records the tormenting memories of Revere. He recalls his struggles when he was young. But now he wants to lead a peaceful life. He remains calm. The conflict in the story is internal. The farmboys also contribute to his painful existence.

In brief old Revere dreams of his past. He is nostalgic about it. He has an optimistic attitude towards life. He lives alone. The farmboys finally kill his dog. He broods over their skillful violence but feels little contempt about it. The story ends with his dreams about the schoolteacher.

“In the Region of Ice” is about a nun. Sister Irene the protagonist of the story is ensnared in the passionate relationship with her student. She teaches English Literature in a Jesuit University. She deliberately chose to lead a secluded and dispassionate life preaching religion. She is independent and self-willed.

The story deals with a one-sided love affair. Allen Weinstein finds in Irene, the woman of his choice. The story begins with Irene. She encounters a new student in her class. His name is Allen. She realizes a spark of genius in him. He asks her radical questions about philosophy and religion. She learns that he has revolutionary ideas. He impresses her by his vehement argumentation. He requests permission to enroll him to English studies and explains her why he was disallowed from his previous history class. Delighted by his radical ideas, she agrees to take him as her student for Masters in English. Here she makes the first mistake.

Allen Weinstein was kicked off from history program because of his arrogance. He shows no change in spite of Irene’s positive and considerate attitude towards him. He makes aggressive comments on the existential philosophy of “Nietzsche, Goethe and Freud”. But Irene gradually learns his rudeness.

He remains irregular. On his return he would make several emotionally appealing excuses. Irene shows understanding. It appears that he receives such consideration perhaps for the first time. One day she receives his letter. He writes about “the new life the way that boy, what’s his name, in *Measure for Measure*, feels about the prospects of different life.”²⁰

The letter has the strong implication of his suicidal intentions. She at once decides to approach his parents in order to explain them that Allen would commit suicide. His father explains Irene about his insanity. The story points out strained familial relationships. Allen hates his father. About a month later Allen meets her. Now everything is clear to her. Allen's excuses lose the ground. He breaks out. He discloses the secret of his disappearance:

They locked me up, they give me shock treatments! Shock treatments, how do you like that it is discredited by everybody now – they're carry out there themselves, sadists. They locked me up, they a human being! Do you know what that is," Weinstein demanded savagely, "not to be treated like a human being? They made me animal – for fifty dollars a day! Dirty filthy swine! Now I'm an outpatient because I stopped swearing at them."²¹

The story projects an unsuccessful relationship of a confused scholar and a cold indifferent nun. It projects the conflicts in a deranged mind demanding kindness and consideration. The conflict thus tends to become psychological. One day he comes to his real intentions: "I want something from you, but I don't know what – I want something!"²²

The conflict becomes religious because Irene is Christian while Allen is Jew. Allen hates Christianity because he feels it is baseless. He further says: "I want something real and not this phoney Christian love garbage – it's all in the books it isn't personal."²³ Allen finally commits suicide by drowning. There is a similar conflict in her mind. "Was she safe or was she trapped? She had only one identity she could make only one choice."²⁴ The story ends on a tragic note.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is about the victimization of a teenage girl named Connie. The story centers round her tragic doom. One Sunday, the family members decide to go out. Her mother asks Connie to accompany them but she prefers to stay at home. The story

gradually moves to its central conflict with the arrival of Arnold Friend, a serial killer especially of teenage girls.

Connie was alone in the house that Sunday. Suddenly she listens to a car coming up a drive. It startles her to the core because she knew her parents could not return so soon. She finds two boys approaching to her. His arrival is the beginning of conflict. It gives sufficient evidence of his uncanny desires. Gradually the story leaps up to a symbolic theme.

Arnold introduces himself and the other boy to her. He is unpredictable. But he reveals his intentions steadily by going round and round. She learns that he is going to kill her. He makes the same argumentation again and again. He lures her by repeatedly calling her; "Sweetheart" or "honey" The climax comes when finally he becomes mad with rage.

He threatens to kill all her family members and to set the house on fire. Fear grips her. She was on the verge of breaking out. The Story ends on a tragic note. As there is no alternative, she gives in to his threats. She feels detached and lonely. She makes frantic efforts to escape from him. She attempts to telephone the police but the phone was out of order. Finally she screams aloud.

She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring she tried out, she cried out for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend was stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness.²⁵

The significant aspect of Oates's writing is that she projects the reality in its myriad forms. In "Heavy Sorrow of the Body" she makes similar attempt to convey the bizarre aspects of academic life. It records the predicament of a college girl named Dorie Weinheimer. She madly loves Mark Arber, her professor. He is a married man of about forty. His wife Barbara Scott is a successful poet. Dorie has the desire to take the place of this woman; to

become the wife of Arber. However she can not understand whether it is love or a form of jealousy.

Oates here experiments with the plot structure. To represent the theme of broken relationships she uses different disconnected sections. Instead of conventional approach, she arranges the story into five sections represented by roman numerals. Each section gives hints for further complication. The story therefore resembles a five-act-play.

The first section introduces Dorie, one of the students of Mark Arber: "She had, in the girl's soft, persistent manner, an idealism-turned-pragmatism under the influence of the college faculty, who had all been idealists at Harvard and Yale as undergraduates but who were now in their forties and as impatient with normative values as they were with their students' occasional locket-shaped-into-crosses."²⁶

One day she gathers all her courage to express her love: "I guess I should tell you, Dr. Arber that I'm in love with you. I've felt that way for some time."²⁷ She confesses her love for him, which brings great astonishment to Mr. Arber. This serves the central conflict of the story.

The second section is about Arber's relationship with Barbara Scott, his wife. She writes poetry which brings her world-wide acclaim. She won Pulitzer Prize for her sonnet sequences. Nowadays, writing becomes a painful exercise for her. She is unable to compose even a single line because of her children, she finds herself trapped in the circumstances.

Her children were a kind of nuisance for her. They took most of her vital energy. The three-year-old Geoffrey opens a bottle of ammonia and spills it on the floor and on him. When she saw him she becomes hysterical she begins screaming:

After half an hour she came to herself and tried to analyze the situation. Did she hate these children, or did she hate herself? Did she hate Mark? Or was her hysteria a form of love, or was it both love and hate together? ²⁸

She is unable to decide. This confusion itself implies her deeply-rooted love for Mark. Her children behave strangely. She is not only annoyed by them but also confused of her own situation. She can not comprehend her own mysterious behavior: "Barbara, stood in the dark and contemplated the bulk of her own body, wondering what to do and knowing that there was nothing she would do, no way for her to change the process of events any more than she could change the heavy fact of her body itself." ²⁹

Mark closely observes her clumsiness since she was unable to concentrate on her literary pursuits. As the children disturb her routine, he decides to keep a housekeeper. He tells her that she should not neglect her poetry. One day he comes with Dorie and introduces her to his wife. He requests Barbara to take her up. Barbara says nothing. This section is remarkable in another respect. It reveals the relationship between the husband and wife. It appears strained and seems on the verge of breaking at any minute.

The third section depicts the three individuals living together like a family, although Dorie is still an outsider. She was innocent, young girl. Dorie brings order to the clumsiness of Arber house. She often accompanied him to parties. Their closeness gradually turns into more intimate relationship.

It makes Barbara feel irritated and restless. "No, I can manage, I've been making breakfast for eight years by myself," Barbara would say angrily, and Dorie, a chastised child, would glance around the table not only at Mark but at the children for sympathy."³⁰ Often she loses her control. Her creativity comes dangerously to a stagnant block. The reason of this upheaval in her life is the overwhelming grief of the dishonesty of her husband as well as the jealousy.

Dorie lives with them for around four months. In April, Mark enters in Barbara's room. After making some casual enquiries about her literary pursuits he comes to the main point. He tells her that Dorie is pregnant. The peak point in this story comes with this incident. Dorie deliberately involves in physical relationship with him. But Mark still wants to retain his relationship with Barbara.

With great care, he persuades her to drive Dorie to a hospital in Boston for abortion. During their conversation, Barbara directly asks him, "Would you like a divorce so you can marry her?"³¹ Instead of getting embarrassed, he tactfully reminds her about their stable marriage and leaves the decision to her.

The fourth section gradually resolves the conflict. The intrusion of a girl in the lives of two successful and famous writers brings a great trouble. It breaks their seemingly stable marriage. The story moves to a "falling action." or the resolution of the plot. Mark leaves for Chicago. Barbara drives the girl to Boston. She thinks about Mark and the fate of the girl. She feels bad about the girl. She takes her to a motel.

The fifth or final section serves the denouement or perhaps the catastrophe. The conflict in the story resolves in a strange manner. Barbara Scott, a famous writer dies a tragic death. Her tragedy lies in the betrayal; in the awareness that her husband no longer needs her. She is grief-stricken moreover by the discovery that he used her only as an object to accomplish his desires. The loss of faith and the betrayal distresses her. She commits suicide by taking a large dose of sleeping pills.

Thus Dorie becomes the third Mrs. Arber. After a month she gives birth to a baby girl, Carolyn. She took care of the girl and the boys. She could not finish her education. Conversely however "Mark was invited everywhere that spring; he flew all the way out to California to take part in a highly publicized symposium with George Steiner and James Baldwin and Dorie stayed home."³²

She feels trapped and cheated. The marriage she often contemplated in her daydream becomes reality:

Dorie herself was not very surprised, because a daydreamer is prepared for most things and in a way she had not guessed how it would come about. Surely she had rehearsed the second Mrs. Arber's suicide and funeral already a year before, when she'd known nothing, would have guessed nothing and it did not really surprised her.³³

The story ends on a tragic note. Instead of accomplishing anything by herself, the girl becomes an object of his accomplishments.

“Wheel of Love” the title story has to its center two individuals namely David and Nadia. It is about a woman who commits suicide. She does it because she felt the love of her husband unbearable. The story's structure is different from the linear or chronological sequence of events. It rather begins with the memories of the past; a device popularly known as flashback technique. Consider these fragmentary lines at the beginning of the story:

He and Nadia turned up the walk to their apartment building.

He and Nadia would go out to dinner that night.

He and Nadia could drive off any time they wanted, go anywhere: they were free.³⁴

Like her previous stories the story is divided in three sections. In the first section open with David's wife who is dead. He is thinking about her. Her memories make him to turn indifferent to the world around him.

The innovative techniques employed in this story consist of the abrupt and inconsistent comments on the central characters as well as lack of concern to the unities of time, place and action. Conflict is revealed largely through the character's consciousness.

The story begins with David, the central character. Jerry, his ex-student invites him to his apartment. He accepts the invitation and decides to be normal

“It was almost too much effort for him to show that he was alive every cell in his body ached to die and have it over with.”³⁵ It is because of the tormenting memories of Nadia. The grief overshadows him. He refuses to be social because of the fear of the strange looks of the people: “He would always be pointed out as the man whose wife had killed herself. That would be the only interesting fact about him and how could he ever rise about it by anything in his own life.”³⁶

Instead of the conventional structure, the plot of the story reveals through a series of incidents, experiences and memories of the past. The first section is about the social relationship of David. There is a sudden change because of his wife’s death. The second section records the memories of his wife before her death. She loved David but the love became a kind of unbearable burden for her.

Nadia laughed. “But you’re the one who’s strange! How anyone can stay in one place, one room, for five years the way you did, the same job, the same life... what should we do now?”³⁷

David’s social life becomes tedious and unbearable because of Nadia’s suicide. The first section describes the events in his life three months after her death. The second section concludes with her giving to David’s passion. Although, Nadia is no more, the story centers on her. The section largely deals with her comments, her experiences with David and their journey together by a car.

The third or final section begin with : “About seven years before that day, in early October, David had been in his old room a few blocks from the university, waiting.” It depicts an evening in his life with Nadia. The complication that appears in the second section has however nothing to do with it. The second section concerns oddly with “Nadia constant yearnings for liberation from the emotional dependence. For six years, she could not escape

from David's passionate love. It makes her anxious and excited. As a result she commits suicide.

The section depicts the love between David and Nadia. David recalls their passionate love. It overwhelms him, "No one else existed in the world except them. There was no one"³⁸ The story ends on a tragic note. Even though the couple lives together, loving each other, the woman feels rather repelled by the relationship. She leaves her husband desolate and bewildered. She commits suicide to liberate herself from the burdens of the relationship. Thus the author brings a unique effect to the story with gripping details of conflict in her mind.

In "Heavy sorrow of the Body" Nina and Conrad are the two major characters. The story has three different sections. Each section reveals Nina's attitude to life and also recounts her relationship with various men like Peter, Conrad, and her father. The first section opens with the description of an apartment. It also provides significant information about the relationship between Nina and Conrad.

Nina loves Conrad but fears to develop any long and trusted relationship such as marriage. It is because such relationships tend to confine the woman. She hates to live together for a long time, because it tends to hamper her freedom. The disorder in their apartment also implies their aimless lives. Although they decide to live together for a year, their relationship appears to have no future.

The first section introduces Nina. She works as a substitute teacher in the city's public school system. The story also ironically comments on the discrepancies in the educational system. The students could not concentrate on what they learn because of the uncertainty of teachers. It is evident from Nina's experience of her students:

Teachers came and went, recruited out of anywhere, they wised up or were frightened out, or in sheer muscular reaction,

fled after a half day. Oh Nina had to laugh at it, it was so sad and so crazy, some of the kids swore they had been studying Mesopotamia the day before, other kids swore they'd been reading about the American Indians, still others were scared and blank and blank and malicious. Totally lost.”³⁹

Because she is temporarily working as a teacher she worried about her future. She feels the danger of getting lost; of getting ruined her life. She lives with Conrad. It is a temporary relationship. She craves for a permanent position and independence: “Danger was all about her, she was thirty now and lazily she knew that something ought to shape her life, some form should arise, she should get a permanent job and take up with permanent people . . .”⁴⁰

One day Nina receives a letter from her father. It informs that her father was “very badly sick”. She becomes self-conscious and angry at the thought of visiting her parental home. It is because:

At the age of seventeen she had left home, glad to get out, and for two years she lived with a bitch of an aunt and shed made her own and she'd made no one else. She did not remember her father. She hated him, his sickness and dying, and there was something particularly repulsive about the thought of an old man dying. He was a stranger to her, he was nothing.⁴¹

The second section introduces the conflict in the story. But the conflict tends to become internal. Nina feels irritated at the thought of visiting her father, because it means parting from Conrad. She takes Conrad's car and drives the place where he was kept under the supervision of a nurse named Mrs. Stocker. She informs her that he got a tumor and the next day there will be an operation to remove it. Nina suddenly realizes that she will not see him alive.

After he was admitted in the hospital, Nina asks about what they are going to do next. She learns that the nurse would wash him after an injection. Surprisingly at this moment, she decides to wash him. She cleans his weak

body in such a way that even the nurse admires her. Her father dies after the operation and she cleans the room.

His death was an end of something for her. With it she also finishes her affair with Conrad. She breaks the relationship with him and decides to live alone. Conrad often wrote letters to her, but she replied: "*My father should be getting better soon. I'll be back soon but he needs me now.*" ⁴² It clearly indicates that she no longer wants to continue the relationship with him. The story demonstrates human relationship as strained and disintegrated. Even the blood-relations are strained, marriages are broken.

"Ruth" has conventional structure of the "beginning, middle and end." It begins with an introduction to Wreszin family – Mr. Wreszin, his wife and Betty, his daughter and also his large farm. Oates introduces "dialogue" very effectively to give the hint of complication. One day Wreszin's wife informs him about her Cousin Junie:

"Well, she had a new baby a few months ago, and she then had the girl Ruthie and the boy, what was his name – And she found the place for the two of them and was going to keep Ruthie, but now she can't keep Ruthie either because she has to have a whole lot of operations – it's awful, a real awful, thing for Junie – And he never gave her no money either or what he did went for doctor's bills. She said..."

"What about the girl?" Wreszin said. ⁴³

The above conversation initiates the conflict. Wreszin agrees after a little persuasion to take Ruth in for the summer. Mrs. Wreszin makes all the arrangements for Ruth. She does it out of compassion for the poor soul. Ruth endures her painful existence with heavy heart. Her mother has abandoned her. She comes to stay with Wreszin family.

The story reveals strong autobiographical element– the facts about Ms. Oates's mother. Carolina's childhood was similar to Ruth's. She was "given to her aunt as an infant when her father suddenly died and left the family

impoverished.”⁴⁴ Ruth also has great power of endurance which soon distinguishes her from Betty. Betty is also little innocent, but not like Ruth. To Wreszin, she is just another girl.

“In his world there had always been too many children – brothers and sisters, cousins, babies, neighbors, children. They were part of the landscape. You took care of them and worried about them, but you did not pay much attention to them until they did something wrong. Wreszin thought of the girl who was coming to stay with him as just another child. Anything outside his home usually unpleasant to him, but Ruth would be just another child.”⁴⁵

Initially, Ruth’s arrival makes no great difference except to Betty. Ruth becomes a threat to her identity. Mrs. Wreszin wanted Betty to follow Ruth. She liked the refinement of Ruth’s suburban upbringing.” Why don’t you act nice and quiet like Ruth?” Mrs. Wreszin was always saying to her daughter.⁴⁶ Even Mr. Wreszin liked the girl’s good manners and her submissive nature. She never complains about anything.

Gradually however the central idea becomes clear. Wreszin feels sympathy for the girl. With her he could forget his failures, frustration and loneliness. He develops an illicit relationship with her. Ruth remains quiet and yields to his desire. The conflict reaches the climax, when he confesses his love:

“I love you”, he said. These words, which he had not spoken for so long, made him dizzy. They echoed with the same words that had been said years ago and the echo jangled in his brain. “Are you happy?” he said desperately. “Is this right?” “I am happy.” She said. Her eyes were vague and frightened, as if they had no idea of what her words meant.⁴⁷

The above scene serves the climax for the story. Wreszin’s question, “Is this right?” points out the age-old conflict between good and evil the moral and unethical. Wreszin loves Ruth, a girl his daughter’s age. To his surprise and

delight, she accepts his love. The love between them is genuine but it is not socially acceptable. One day Ruth tells him that she is going to have a baby.

The conflict now gradually moves towards the resolution. He plans the escape carefully. The relationship between Ruth and Wreszin becomes a story of failure because of the terrible accident. The next day, they leave the home. Wreszin drives the car very fast. He wanted to escape from the feelings of guilt and the social disrespect. The act of running away with a girl is symbolic of running away from reality. In the end, there is accident. The careless driving brings great destruction. Wreszin eventually dies in the accident. These climactic happenings suggest the ultimate end of the debased morality. The story ends on tragic note.

“Free” is about a girl named Lea Gregg. She belongs to an affluent class. Her father is a doctor. As its title suggests the story centers round her intense struggle to become free from all kinds of dependence.

The story has three sections. The first section opens with a flashback. Lea Gregg leaves her affluent home. She recalls her miserable childhood because of her mother’s craze for the antiques. Lea loves her mother but disliked this craze. In spite of their unfailing love and care, she wanted to get free from this maddening craze to imitate the old world.

It introduces the major characters Lea, her parents and Anthony Petruchio, the first man she loved. It also introduces the central idea. The story depicts her relentless urge to get free from all restraints on her life. She leaves her parents home because she no longer wanted to confine herself in the closed universe of her mother. At the age of twenty-six she encounters Terry. “He was an instructor at New York University, not a professor, not one of the permanent faculty, which he explained quickly and ironically to evening he met”.⁴⁸

The story reveals Lea as an arrogant teenage girl who brings embarrassment to her parents by stealing things from the stores. The second section deals with Lea's academic life. The story lacks chronological order. It unfolds through the character's thoughts and consciousness, Lea encounters several men. She also experiments with love. She has love affairs with different people. One was a sociology instructor. He reveals to her that she is emotionally dependent and therefore could not be free: "Lea you claim to know it but I don't believe you. You are always enslaving yourself".⁴⁹

Anthony has similar views. She meets him in a party. He was an amateur novelist. Lea still receives money from her parents by writing letters to them. He explains her that he is not a hypocrite like her. Because she takes money from parents and yet claims to be independent. She fell in love with him. She likes him for his love of truth. But their relationship could not last long.

She lives in sorority. After a month with her parents she returns to her college. She returns her sorority house disillusioned. Even the sorority house also seems to her another kind of confinement. This section deals with her love-affair with Terry. The discovery of economic dependence and the unemployment leads to another dreadful consequence: Lea drifts into the profession of prostitution. She feels no guilt for now she is not dependent on her parents. She stops writing letters to her mother.

Terry was also a writer. He has three children. His wife committed suicide eight years ago. They live together. Lea took care of his children. She also works as an editor, but soon after the project the job comes to an end. The love becomes an obsession for them. They cared little about their children. "Under his influence she began to experience a certain illumination, with drugs. The essence of the experience, Terry told her, was not physical at all, but spiritual."⁵⁰

But a final breach comes to their relationship when one day his daughter takes drugs, which makes her hysterical and out of mind. Terry turns out indifferent to Lea after this incident perhaps because she holds her responsible for this. This humiliation makes her angry. She leaves him and once again returns to Alice. She contemplates the love between her as: “a bog she’d fallen into and drowned. A bog: stagnant and disgusting”⁵¹

The climax appears when she again decides to drifts into prostitution. In third section, Lea finds appears in a hospital. She thinks that the doctors fit a birth control device inside her. She has hallucinations. She goes to Dr. Joris for consultation. The story ends with Lea’s maddening desire for the liberty.

Magna Mater reveals the hypocrisy of the modern world through the experiences of two individuals: Nora Akenside and her son Dennis. Oates employs “dialogue” to introduce the central conflict. This is evident from their conversation with which the story opens:

“Where is he?”

“Why do you keep asking me that? You know he is in New York. You were just there two weeks ago. Stop asking that stupid question.”

“But where is he right now?”⁵²

The conversation reveals that the boy is obstinate and aggressive. The ‘he’ is obviously his father. There is very little action in the story. The conflict discloses either through their conversation or through the character’s consciousness. The story tends to become psychological. The story is about the couple whose relationship is broken. Nora Akenside is a successful scholar and academician. She works as a professor.

Dennis has hallucinations. He often interrupts her even when she speaks on telephone. Sometimes she finds absolutely no solution.. He craves her attention and resents her professional life. She chiefly suffers from his hysterical and abnormal behavior. He becomes so possessive. Dr. Gruber

analyses his condition. The disintegrated familial relationships, her busy professional life and the lack of fatherly love together make him hysterical and intensely possessive.

Instead of linear development or a chronological sequence, Oates reveals the conflict largely through the consciousness. Dennis seems to be too much dreadful of Nora's social relationships. One day Mason Colebrook and his wife visits Nora's house. Colebrook begins accusing Nora as "selfish, sadistic". Nora feels betrayed again because Colebrook was the man she somehow believed. However, Mason Colebrook makes the final blow to destroy her moral integrity completely. He was the man she believed. His rudeness and the indifference shatter all her beliefs. It destroys her last ray of hope.

The story ends swiftly. The end appears as a logical consequence. Dennis, who observes all these happenings, realizes that Nora would follow them. He feels insecure and becomes crazy for her. It was like this:

Behind her Dennis was whining: "Mother? Mother?"

She turned.

"You are not going with them, are you? – to some party or something ? Are you? You said we'd be home all day by ourselves— you said . . . you promised. . .

She closed the door. She was trembling.⁵³

She learns that Dennis would be hysterical once again she assures him that she has no intention to go any where or follow them. In brief, the story records the struggle of Nora, a successful woman now in her middle age. She suffers chiefly from the broken marriage. Dennis is the victim of their broken relationship. His eccentric behavior is perhaps the result of broken relationship. Thus the story ends with the perennial confinement of Nora.

"A Premature Autobiography" as its title indicates, is written in the manner of an autobiography. It has various sections or episodes about the

relationship between an anonymous girl student and Herbert Breuer, a famous composer. The first section 'Breuer at the Sisley Academy, 1954' opens with Herbert Breuer as described by the narrator:

Anxiety in him – his tense body, his gesturing hands, his eyes that dart everywhere about the auditorium, not finding a place to rest. Impossible to imagine the color of those eyes, I am sitting too far away.

Behind me a man begins coughing.

Breuer speaks softly and rapidly. His smile flicks off and on, not touching us. Why is he so anxious? Why is he apologizing for himself? ⁵⁴

The above extract reveals almost nothing. It provides no useful information. But it gives cues for further complication. Although the description lacks consistency and particularity of purpose; it retains its significance. It implies inconsistency in the personality of the anonymous protagonist who narrates the story.

In this story Oates experiments with the plot structure: There is no linear progression of events. Instead it is divided into eight sections dealing with different events in the life of a woman. There is no chronological sequence. The sections are entitled as "Breuer at the Sisley Academy, 1954", "Breuer at the foundation, Robson Memorial square.", "Breuer's second concerto for Piano and Orchestra", "Breuer on the telephone", "Breuer in private, February 1955", "Breuer in New York, April 1955", "Breuer in England" and "Breuer on Breuer, 1969."

Each section has different context and time. The first section begins with and covers the incidents of 1954. The other section is set in February 1955; while another section describes events of 1969. Oates makes a similar experiment in "Concerning the Case of Bobby T," another story.

There is no consistent chronological order. Furthermore, each section reveals different aspect of the protagonist. In the first section, the girl student

meets Herbert Breuer for the first time in her life. He speaks in a relaxed manner. Third section reveals that their relationship advances toward intimacy.

The girl finally fails in love with him. The continuity of the theme is surprisingly maintained through the various incidents happened during different times. The fifth section entitled “Breuer in Private 1955.” is crucial in the whole story. It depicts the relationship between a middle-aged married man and a young girl of eighteen. This section also reveals Herbert Breuer’s inactivity and days of utter depression in Buffalo. He comes out of this successfully because of her love and care. He says:

In New York they have more money, but I am not thinking of that. I am thinking only of how I must survive. You are the only thing that helped me live – you saved my life – that is a fact we both know. Now it will finish itself, I am confident of that, I will not die. And so you must come with me to this new place”.⁵⁵

However, Breuer leaves for England without her. In 1969, after about thirteen years, she comes to know that he has written his autobiography and is going to publish it. Suddenly she becomes anxious for the book. She believes that Breuer must have written about their relationship. She eagerly begins to read the whole book entitled “A Premature Autobiography of the Great composer.” She leafs through the pages anxiously to find a mention of her name. In the chapter “Breuer’s Americanization, 1954-55” she finds only few lines about her:

Weeks passed without work At this time Breuer was nursed back to health by a student from the Academy. He recalls this young girl. He recalls this young girl as very talented and very devoted to Breuer and in a way he owes all the work he accomplished at this time (and after this time) to her. In fact, from time to time Breuer says to himself: “I will try to recall that name. I will try to recall that face.”⁵⁶

The woman feels that her life was over with Breuer. Her name would never appear again, this indifference to her love makes her very sad. She had

passionately loved Breuer but gets nothing in return or what she might have expected. The story thus ends like a book or someone's biography.

Joyce makes experiments with plot structure. The story projects various incidents in the life of Herbert Breuer through the perspective of an anonymous girl student. The arrangement of various sections is in such a way that they emerge as different pages from an autobiography. An abrupt beginning, twist ending, narration in the form of an autobiography are therefore the characteristic features of this story.

Often her stories have abrupt beginnings. Sometimes they begin with a conversation or a dream-like vision. "The Goddess" for instance, begins with the conversation between husband and wife.

"No, *please*" her husband said sharply.

The black porter had gone to the television set in the hotel room and was about to switch it on.

"Thank you, but it isn't necessary", Claudia said.

"No, it isn't necessary", Alfred said.⁵⁷

The above conversation appears meaningless, but the emphasis on the word "please" suggests further complication in the story. It introduces Alfred's dominance. The story depicts an incident of the theft in a famous hotel. The incident initiates the conflict. Alfred works in a pharmaceutical company. He comes with his wife Claudia to stay in an expensive hotel, Sherwood Plaza. A black porter brings their bags. He becomes the central concern throughout the story. Entering the hotel room, Alfred is delighted to see that they are in his favorite room 1720. He always stayed in the same room during his business trips. It was afternoon when they entered the hotel room. They leave their room for shopping and visiting art galleries.

When they return late at night, Alfred discovers to his surprise that his briefcase was gone. He assumes that the black porter must have entered the

room after their departure and must have picked it. He reports the theft to the manager and demands urgent investigations. Although the briefcase contains just some xerox copies of his papers, he makes a great fuss. Claudia was not sure whether he brought it with him or lost it somewhere else.

He calls the police. He waits anxiously for them throughout the night. Claudia feared that she would not get any rest till the policemen come. But she could not sleep because of the anxiety. The story reveals the conflict in the mind of Claudia.

The climax of the story is very powerful. It comes in the end through the visions of Claudia: "The street-people, the hotel workers, the prostitutes: all were criminals, and so obvious, in their criminality, so easily detected, but she was really invisible".⁵⁸ It reveals her criminal intentions. It becomes clear that she hides the briefcase.

In her stories especially those discussed above, Oates employs various techniques to evoke the conflict between illusion and reality. Her early stories follow the traditional pattern. Most of the stories in *By the North Gate* 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 divided into various 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. They primarily deal with the confused picture of reality. The segregation of the stories in various sections aptly helps to depict the above themes. Oates occasionally uses the psychological way of narration. 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.

II. Characterization

Characterization is equally crucial aspect of the short story. Oates explores the dark recesses of human psyche. Her vision penetrates deep into the lives of innumerable people involved in a kind of “Darwinian struggle for existence”. She chiefly concentrates on their tough lives in highly indifferent and hostile circumstances.

An essential aspect of her female characterization is that she never uses “stereotypical female images” which she observes in the writing of Yeats, Lawrence, and Faulkner.⁵⁹ Often her stories penetrate deep into the darkest recesses of the women she wishes to project as characters. Her women never appear as strong, dominant successful women found in feminist writings. They have the opposite characteristics such as submissiveness or innocence.

Her women behave in a strange and unpredictable manner. Oates highlights their abnormality in many stories. Grace in “Pastoral Blood” drifts into the maddening desire to ruin herself. She brings her sexual destruction through yielding to the lust of strangers on highways. She has no repentance of her amoral behavior. She wants to get free even from the confines of her body. Greg Johnson remarks that:

Already Joyce’s fictional heroines had begun to follow a distinct pattern: denied sufficient nurture and protection as children, suffering molestation and abuse, they fail to develop their own nurturing instincts, perpetuating the cycle of familial disconnection into subsequent generations. The pattern also includes their view of sexuality not as a Lawrencian opportunity for transcendence but as a means of further degradation.⁶⁰

Grace in “Pastoral Blood” leads similar degradation. It is further intensified by lust of highway men.

In “Free,” Lea is another such woman. Like Grace, she also belongs to an affluent class. She lives with her parents. But she is rebellious in nature. It is

also evident from the opening lines of the story which illustrate her rebel against her family: "She was from a good family, "from a good family," and it was a handicap like any other: Like prominent teeth in high school, like a dancer's sudden loss of nerve".⁶¹ She resents her aristocratic background. She has a desperate desire to become independent of her refined existence. She thinks to bring shame to her parents in spite of their loving nature:

Her parents took every care to nurture her, they had her vaccinated and inoculated, they had her teeth outfitted with braces, her skin treated for blemishes when she was eleven, her hair was cut by Rocky of the Electra. Beauty Salon, she was enrolled in swimming classes and in tennis classes at the country club, in riding classes at the Hunt club, in ballet classes at a private dance school, in the eleven O'clock children's Sunday school⁶²

In spite of their unfailing love and care, she drifts to prostitution. Similarly, the woman in "Swamps" is equally complex character. Oates presents her as nameless perhaps to demonstrate the universal predicament of a woman who has fallen prey to male desire. She represents the marginalization of woman. The old man's cheerful and happy life appears in contradiction with the woman's pessimism and arrogance. She remains obscure throughout the story. She is the victim of the debased morality of the time. She apparently has suicidal tendencies. She hates any kind of sympathy.

Her bitter sarcasm reveals the deeply-rooted hatred. She hates even the man who saved her life; the one who relieved her from the painful burden of pregnancy. She was so eager to become free that she kills her own baby and even hits the old man. Other minor characters appear as the son, his wife and his grandson. The old man's daughter-in-law admires him in spite of his aloofness. She likes his "prickly independence."⁶³

A significant character in the "Ceremonies" is Elizabeth Rockland; the arrogant daughter of Mr. Rockland. She is essentially the dynamic character in the story. She was most beautiful in the family, but her beauty accompanies

with her willfulness and arrogance. As she grew old, she became more proud and self conscious. She is different from other country girls. She befriends “the very bad Kramer boy” a handsome, maliciously grinning boy with the beginning of a beard and the reputation of relentless mischief.⁶⁴

When she was eleven the incident in her school reveals the characteristic traits of her personality. Her arrogance somehow helps her to escape from Mr. Berkman, a hysterical schoolteacher in her school. One day Elizabeth becomes the victim of his fury, because she laughed at his pronunciation. “Can’t even say Sioux! Sioux!” It offends him. But she shows great courage and determination. Instead of succumbing to terror, she becomes angry and stubborn. She keeps shouting and screaming at him:

“Don’t you touch me!” she screamed.” Nasty old man! Nasty old thing! I’ll cut out your liver!’ She ran past Berkman to his desk and pushed at his books, knocking them onto the floor, scattering pencils and pieces of chalk.” I’ll cut out your liver and make you eat it, your nasty old thing!” she cried.⁶⁵

Somehow she manages to save herself by running and turning everything topsy-turvy. Her twin brothers and the Kramer boy come to her rescue: “Berkman, trapped between the three boys, gave a shout and ran blindly past one of the twins to an open window. He scrambled up onto the ledge, swung his feet very neatly over it, and as well as all watched in ecstasy, disappeared.”⁶⁶

Irene is the protagonist of “In the Region of Ice” She leads the pious and austere life of a nun. The story has to its centre two lives, Sister Irene and her student, Allen Weinstein. Oates depicts their love-affair from the viewpoint of religion. As individuals both Irene and Allen are extremists. Irene has chosen to lead a dispassionate life of a nun. She had made her choice she could not cross the confines of religion. In the same manner Weinstein fruitlessly pursues the “ideas and believes them as real. He is sentimental aggressive and sometimes hysterical.

An important aspect of Oates's characterization is parallelism. It is a technique of introducing another parallel character which has contradictory attitude or qualities. She employs this innovative method to evoke the character's mood, disposition and way of thinking perceived and heightened through another minor character.

In "Swamps", she depicts the character of an anonymous woman. Perhaps, to emphasize her arrogance she introduces another woman, an old man's daughter-in-law. She is submissive and dutiful woman. She takes care of the old man and respects his independent life, conversely the woman hates him. She even swears at him.

A similar contrast appears in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie is the central character in this story. She likes to involve in teenage pursuits and love- affairs, she explores relationships. Her sister June is exactly opposite to her. She stands in steep contrast:

Her sister June was twenty four and still lived at home. She was a secretary in the high school Connie attendee and if that wasn't bad enough – with her mother's sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn't do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy daydreams.⁶⁷

The sisters grew up in the same house but there is such a great difference. There was one thing in common. June went to places with her girl friends. So when Connie also wanted to do that her mother had no objections. These are obvious teenager adventures she involves in. She would go shopping or to movies and drive-in restaurants with her friends.

Connie appears superior to her sister. Even her mother admires her because she was prettier. "Connie is dynamic character throughout the story. The mention of her sister appears only at the beginning. There is a passing mention to their father. He is described in only three lines. "Their father was

away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed.”⁶⁸

In “Ruth”, Oates employs the same technique. Ruth is the title character, is a quiet and innocent girl. To highlight her qualities, Oates introduces the character of Betty another girl of her age. She is different from Ruth in many ways. The contrast between these two girls is apparent from:

Mrs. Wreszin liked her because she was so quiet and submissive. Betty always gave in, but not the way Mrs. Wreszin wanted her to- you could tell by Betty’s plump sour face what she really thought. Ruth, however, did not think anything. She worked until perspiration was beaded on her face and her hair was damp, but she did not think about anything.⁶⁹

Ruth’s submissive nature is thus contradictory to Betty’s arrogance and stubbornness. Ruth belongs to urban world of refined manners. She comes to stay with Wreszin’s family. Betty is conversely the exact opposite. She is not pretty enough like Ruth: “Betty’s face was coarse and loomed next to Ruth’s like a cartoon face. After Ruth had been living with them a month or so, Betty began to act strangely—she was childish and shrill and rolled her eyes much too often.”⁷⁰

Although presented as weak and submissive girl, Ruth assumes a pivotal role in the story. She comes to stay with Wreszin family. Soon she distinguishes herself as an independent girl. In the beginning the girl brings no great change in his life. This makes the difference. Her character sketch appears to have been modeled on Oates’s mother, Carolina Dates. Like Ruth, Carolina was also informally adopted by her aunt Lena.

Since Lena and her husband John had no children, they volunteered to take in the six month old Carolina, already burdened with eight other children, Elizabeth agreed to this informal adoption – a transaction that Carolina would later come to resent deeply. . . As she grew older, however, she came to perceive the adoption as abandonment by her mother.⁷¹

She belongs to the sophisticated and refined life found in cities. Mrs. Wreszin admires her because she has a great fascination for the urban life. She often compares her daughter Betty with Ruth: "If Betty looked half way like that," she would whisper and sigh."⁷² Everyone loves her simplicity and quiet nature. Betty is the only person who feels uneasiness at her arrival in the family. She often attempts to assert her rights as the daughter.

The sense of disillusionment is prevalent in many stories of Joyce Carol Oates. Her female protagonists often fear the possibility of getting lost. In "Free," for instance Lea has similar experiences: "It seemed to her that every day was of crucial importance that her life might end and would have come to nothing, had been worth nothing."⁷³ Lea is the central character in "Free". She is perhaps the only dynamic character in the story.

As the title suggests, Oates projects her struggle of independence through Lea Gregg, the protagonist of this story. She suffers from a mental breakdown. Because she can not bear the reality that a woman has to depend on men both physically and emotionally. She is never free. This suffocates her.

She is unable to tolerate the burden of the hypocrisy of her parents. Her mother loves authentic furniture. Her childhood becomes miserable because of the restrictions in the house. She reveals her deprived childhood through an incident as: "My God! I couldn't touch anything, I couldn't play anywhere, can you imagine it? Everywhere all this crap! It was beautiful, some of it, but it was dead."⁷⁴ Lea resents such craze which deprives the childhood happiness and makes it miserable. Lea is thus the representative of the independent minded women who want to be free.

Similarly in "Heavy sorrow of the Body," Nina breaks away her relationship with Peter "an earnest, dour, intelligent young man of Slavic descent— oblong headed, with glasses, unsparing in his criticism of all failures except his own, really a nice person."⁷⁵ Instead she develops a fleeting

relationship with Conrad. But when she experiences the death of her father, she suddenly realizes the futility of this nameless relationship. Her sense of disillusionment is clear from the description.

She was running out of money but she did not think about it. She ate little she had forgotten about eating. She sat for hours in her soiled baggy clothes, men's trousers and men's shirts, thinking. She felt strangely quiet, as if under a final spell.⁷⁶

Nora Akenside is a successful academician as well as a prolific writer. She leads a busy life. She is also an influential literary critic and scholar. She receives great acclaim for her academic and literary achievements. However:

In the academic and literary world, much of the praise that came her way was deliberate, even rehearsed. She was how on the promotion and tenure committee of her department and it was generally known that she was a reader for a number of university presses, though the identities of these readers were always kept secret . . . and of course she did many reviews, ceaselessly, reviews not only of critical and scholarly books in her own field but reviews of poetry and biographies so whatever praise came to her might well be calculated.⁷⁷

Nora the protagonist of the story is a middle-aged woman. She lives with her son Dennis. Her husband had given her divorce after several years of close relationship. However she seems not least surprised by this, not even by his immediate remarriage, Theodore Drexler married a twenty-four year old girl.

She is not submissive. She believes in herself, in her own abilities. She never complains although "they had been in love once." She was proud of her achievements. "The most intense pride in herself was her moral integrity her commitment to the truth."⁷⁸

As she is confident self-reliant and emotionally strong, she could have led a smooth and undisturbed life. She bravely accepts the rejection. She endures it as an inevitable consequence of their disturbed relationship. Besides

she expresses no contempt for her husband. She is the only powerful existence. She is illuminating because of her power of endurance. She has successful career in spite of the rejection, the divorce her son's hysterical behavior. The academic world is indifferent and surprisingly hostile about her achievements and about her heroic struggle. She leads her way in spite of these circumstances.

Oates comments on the deteriorating familial and social relationships. She parodies the obscurity and cynicism of the modern world. The rejection of Nora when she was forty five is unintelligible. Even Drexler's immediate remarriage with twenty seven year old girl is absurd. But Dennis her nine year old boy keeps torturing her emotionally. He disturbs her daily routine. His hysterical behavior makes her impossible to concentrate on anything. She chiefly suffers from his hysterical and abnormal behavior. He becomes so possessive. Nora's subtle character sketch aptly is the work of a genius.

"The Goddess" is about Claudia who suffers from her husband's extreme arrogance and egotistical nature. He unconsciously denigrates her. There are two major characters Alfred and Claudia. Alfred works for a pharmaceutical company. He often goes on business trips. He travels to London, Madrid, Amsterdam and Munich. On one of such visits, Claudia accompanies him. They come to stay in hotel. A black porter brings their luggage.

He suspects the black porter who brings their luggage. The theft occurs when they leave the room for some shopping and visiting art galleries. It is Claudia who suffers from this incident. She was not sure that whether they really had the briefcase. She attempts to explain it to Alfred. But he was very angry and too preoccupied to listen to her. "What? Of course I had the briefcase. There were four pieces of luggage, four, I counted them a half dozen times, I checked them all the way in and up this room." Alfred said, "So please don't for Christ's sake confuse me."⁷⁹

This annoys Claudia. The writer presents her painful existence as a woman who lacks her selfhood. She becomes marginalized, overshadowed by her husband's egocentric and aggressive nature. She is outwardly composed but underneath there is an insatiable quest for self. She wishes to escape from this world.

Male characters dominate in her early stories especially in her first collection *By the North Gate*. There are two major characters in "Swamps", an old man and the anonymous young woman. The old man is often referred to as "The Grandfather" throughout the story. He is the major character in 'Swamps'. "He was a big solid man, beginning now to lose flesh in his chest, arms and face but he tried to walk Just as fast and firmly as ever at least when people were around."⁸⁰ The woman is troubled by her pregnancy, yet she dislikes receiving any help or consideration. Moved by her pathetic condition, he comes to her rescue.

A sense of nostalgia for the old world pervades throughout the story. The Grandfather is the representative of the old world. He accepts every trouble cheerfully in his life and never complains about anything. He helps people in their troubles, even when they are envious to him.

He lives a little away from his son's house, in his log cabin. He leads an isolated life. Old Hamp sometimes comes to visit him. Sometimes he sings songs, imitates roosters and likes to laugh aloud. They often sing the song about swamp fire. He is a carefree cheerful old man. His disposition becomes clear from the following description:

A few chickens would be picking about the sawdust and dried grass and if the rooster was there and crowing. The Grandfather would answer him." His son grew up pessimistic, contrary to his expectations." His son a big shouldered, big stomached man—would eat his eggs and drink his coffee, making noises, complaining about his work.⁸¹

His son is sarcastic perhaps because he endures unbearable reality: the exploitation, the monotony of work and the loss of meaning in his life. His son on the other hand is apparently pessimistic and 'sick of life'. He works in a gypsum mill, the representative "apparatus" of exploitation and oppression. He is the victim of the cruelty and exploitation of capitalistic society. His reaction against modern world's greed for power is therefore obvious. He is realist.

Authoritative parents or patriarchal dominance appears in various manifestations in Oates's stories. In "Swamps", the Grandfather lives independent and away from his son. He is optimistic and care free. He loves his grandson. Conversely his son is pessimistic and seems to be angry with every thing. He works in a gypsum mill. He hates the monotonous nature of his work. The conflicting personalities of the father and son rarely have any unpleasant consequences. The grandfather perceives this anger and tells his grandson, that the world is not so bad:

"But don't you pay him no mind, he talks bein' sick of life. It ain't life gone sour on him, it's hisself. But that's all right. You pay him no mind. This-here is a damn good world, a goddam good world, it's all you got an' you better pay no attention to it."⁸²

The old man likes to live alone and independent. His optimism and his inclination of helping others in spite of their narrow-mindedness are the major aspects in his personality. One of the characteristic traits of the old man is his goodness of heart. He loves to help. It is kind of craze or a madness that he nurtured for so many days. He remains innocent and cheerful throughout his life. He represents the old world – secure and full of sympathy, companionship and love. It is the world which is however lost. Gradually there is a change in his values because of the circumstances.

He undergoes transformation in his attitude and commitment when he helps a pregnant woman out of his usual habit. He relieves the woman from the burdens of pregnancy. However, she runs away killing her baby. This

ingratitude and especially the downright cruelty to her child shake him to the core. "The girl hits the old man too.

The woman leaves him stunned and stupid. After the childbirth, she kills her baby and runs away hitting him on his head. This incident is the climatic occasion in the story. He experiences a sense of loss of innocence: "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." But the grandfather would go on, flatly, patiently, "They robbed me. They robbed me."⁸³

He undergoes a sudden transformation: from innocence to experience from optimism to loss of faith. It is because of the betrayal and the ingratitude of the woman toward him. He is therefore the only "round" or "dynamic" character in the story.

In "Ceremonies", there are six characters: Mr. Rockland, his three children, Kramer Boy and the schoolteacher. The most significant character is Mr. Rockland. He remains central to the story. He belongs to an affluent class. He is always proud and self-conscious. Oates describes him vividly as:

He had a big, suntanned face and large eyes that always seemed to roll about – so loose did they seem, so shiny and protruding. He wore a hat the men said was western, he spoke a twangy, arrogant the men said was western and so he took on in the town the aspect of a foreigner – not one who had to make up in friendliness and cunning what he automatically lacked by being foreign (like Jenk), but a foreigner who came from a superior land and so never needed even to think about whether anyone was his equal.⁸⁴ (35-36)

He remains arrogant and aloof through calm or storm. He makes experiments in farming and receives incredible fortunes. Throughout his life, he remains isolated. One day a fire breaks out in his barn and results in complete destruction. But it makes no great difference to him.

Oates introduces equally powerful character. Mr. Berkman, the schoolteacher represents the apparatus of subjugation. He was somewhat hysterical. The narrator describes him as “the eye of a directionless hurricane. When the storm moved, however to touch him to touch his dignity, he became childlessly and mindlessly hysterical.”⁸⁵

Allen Weinstein in “In the Region of Ice” is a troubled personality. Oates here delineates the condition of a deranged mind. One day he writes a poem and gives it to Irene. She finds it intense and passionate. In “Ruth,” on the other hand Mr. Wreszin is a middle-aged man troubled by similar crisis. He owns a large farmland. But he seems burdened by the routine and wearisome life he leads. Bored by the monotonous work in a ‘Machine shop’, he is angry about everything.

Wreszin had the certain, angry idea that he was out of place. He and his son had painted the farmhouse a couple of years ago, but it gave him no pleasure; he did not like to look at it. He would stop his car in the driveway and sit breathing hard, his arms slumped over the steering wheel as if he had at least attained something, but did not know what.⁸⁶

His distress and frustration suggest to a large extent the deteriorating morality. Wreszin’s attitude to life contributes to the gloomy atmosphere of the story. He was sick of everything. He is representative of the people living hard lives during the 1960s. One day his wife tells him how her cousin Junie is suffering from the economic crisis. She has a daughter named Ruth. She asks Wreszin to accept Ruth for the summer since Junie could not keep her. She was about his daughter’s age. Wreszin agrees after a little persuasion. Ruth comes to stay with them.

With Ruth’s arrival, Mr. Wreszin’s dispassionate and self conscious attitude to life somehow changes to optimistic and full of enthusiasm. The story represents the characteristic traits in his personality. It gradually reveals Wreszin as an individual caught in such circumstances from which there is

It reveals Alfred as an individual waging a war against the society. It also indicates his deeply rooted racial hatred for the blacks. He demands aggressively to have an urgent hearing.

His struggle becomes desperate. He calls the police. But policeman comes late to investigate the matter. Since it was very late; he leaves almost immediately after making routine enquires. This means a failure. The policeman does not accuse the black porter. He can not find the briefcase. Yet in spite of this failure, he was successful in a strange way. He makes the system move. He fights bravely till the end. At least he has the satisfaction that he tried without quitting in the middle.

But Claudia remains awake. The last revelation to her makes it clear that Claudia is also somehow indirectly responsible for all these happenings. The ironical tone of the following paragraph demonstrates the fact that Claudia is mysterious even to Alfred. She has a vision:

He loved her and knew nothing of her. She was entirely innocent, entirely safe – if she had prowled the corridors of the Sherwood Plaza and defaced the wall, if she had wrecked the plumbing in one of the restrooms, if she cared someday. To drop a lighted match in a trash bin, she would be utterly safe, No one knew her at all. The street – people, the hotel workers, the prostitutes: all were criminals and so obvious in their criminality, so easily detected. But she was really invisible.”⁸⁹

The above extract has many surprising implications. It becomes clear that Claudia although appears as an insignificant woman to Alfred, is in fact the cause of his trouble. She wishes to escape from her stereotypical role as a wife of Alfred. She knows very well what the briefcase consist of. So she throws it deliberately in the trash bin. It is apparent from her thoughts at that night. She desperately struggles for freedom. After twenty-three years of married life, she finds one day that her role as a woman is deteriorating, getting stereotyped and sadly limited at night she thinks over this. She has a vision of destructions.

Similarly, Conrad in "Heavy Sorrow of the Body" is a troubled scholar. "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 his own theories about history."⁹⁰ He failed in many ways. He failed to accomplish anything worthwhile. He could not choose his destination. Furthermore, he fails to maintain a unique and undisturbed relationship with Nina.

In "Fine White Mist of Winter," Rafe Murray belongs to the superior race, the white. Rafe calls himself sheriffs' best deputy. He feels proud of himself and his position as Deputy. He is arrogant because of his superiority as white man.

To assert his superior position and to intensify certain characteristic traits in his personality, Oates introduces Bethl'em Aire, a Negro. Rafe is aggressive and proud about his position as a deputy police officer. He is insistent upon maintaining law and order. He arrests Bethl'em because he finds him running in the field. On their way to sheriff's office, they encounter a hazardous snowstorm. Rafe keeps cursing the weather. Contrary to his expectations the Negro boy remains apparently clam and strong-willed. He makes no complaint at his arrest, or at the killing cold outside. He has no thoughts about his future.

Another important character is Bethl'em Aire a Negro boy. Rafe arrests him because he was found in a field trying to run up a hill. He claims that by arresting him he rather saved his life because perhaps the boy might have killed himself in the bitter cold. It is his goodness that saved him.

The other Negroes were skeptical about his statement because it is not usual for a white man to save the life of a black. Or even show such goodness. The story ends rather ironically because "Murray thought that some time before very long, surely in a minute or two, he would again continue on his way."⁹¹

An important aspect of "Swamps" is the 'anonymity' of the characters. The story projects almost all the characters as anonymous individuals, involved

in the struggles for self. They appear as the old man or the Grandfather, the son, his wife, the boy's sister, a young woman and such others. The story becomes gripping because of this anonymity, which suggests that the ensuing conflict is universal.

To sum up, the characters reflect the universal sufferings and torments of mankind in the highly hostile and brutal circumstances. The Grandfather may be any other old man moved by the pathetic condition of the woman. Even the anonymous woman would be any woman troubled by her victimization and struggling against all the accepted moral and ethical values. The anonymity of these two individuals implies the universal predicament of the mankind. This heightens the effect of the story. The struggle of the woman becomes universal because of her anonymity.

III. Setting

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. Modern short stories also have psychological settings. Broadly a setting has cultural, historical, geographical dimensions.

Her earlier stories especially those anthologized in the volume *By the North Gate* are set in this country. The name itself implies her ironical tone. It deals with the lives of several dispossessed individuals. It describes the social evils like strained economical situations, rise in crimes, violence racism and several other aspects of economically deprived individuals. "Swamps" and many stories from "By the North Gate" are set in the fictions Eden Country. Oates mythologized the Erie country of her childhood. In it she makes attempts of creating a vision of a country

Mythologizing her parents' and grandparents Erie Country world as "Eden country" in her earliest fictions, and populating the north country with her fictional towns of Yewville, Derby,

Marsena, and Port Oriskany in much of her later work, Joyce wrote out of an intense nostalgia for her parent's vanished world and also from a desire to evoke the "imperishable reality" that lay behind it.⁹²

In "Swamps" the setting appears autobiographical representation of Oates's native place in Millersport in Erie County. The description of the creek appears in "Swamps" which is suggestive of her childhood experiences. Her grandparents' farmland in Millersport is bordered by a similar Tonawala Creek: "Later in the fall the Creek would rise with frequent rains, in winter it would freeze over, in spring it would flood; but right now it was shallow and dirty."⁹³

The above description also helps to understand the disposition of the old man as optimistic and cheerful. The story deals with the old time. "Ceremonies" is set in an anonymous town in "Eden country" later renamed as Rockland. It is about Mr. Rockland. He comes to stay with his children in a small town in Eden country. This "Town" serves the setting of the story.

The Town, as it was called: two or three houses, a church, a feedmill and a combination general store and tavern that faced one another indifferently across an enlarged snake trail called a road. The land in this part of Eden country was apparently rich and promising, but little had been done about it because everyone was land poor (that is he owned more acres than he could farm) and everyone lacked or refused scientific agricultural knowledge.⁹⁴

The above description also reveals the temperaments and way of thinking of the townspeople. The action of this story shifts from Rockland's settlement to the school, church and Hamp Connor's store. Like "Swamps" This story is about bygone age.

Some stories have suburban setting. "Pastoral Blood" records the tormentation of Grace; a woman living in a spacious house in the suburban

area. The story centers round her aimless journey the north. The “North Country” is symbolic. The story mostly happens on the highway.

“Fine White Mist of the Winter” records an incident in the life of a deputy. The setting of the story is clear from the first paragraph: “Some time ago in the Eden country the Sheriff’s best deputy, Rafe Murray, entered what he declared to his wife and man grown Sons, and to every person he encountered for a month, white or black, to be his second period.”⁹⁵ He narrates the experiences of snowstorm when he and a Negro Bethl’em are caught.

“By the North Gate” as its title suggests is set in the Eden Country. Sister Irene’s life as a nun provides a religious background to the story, “In the Region of Ice” the setting of the story is a city. Irene speaks of this city quite ironically as:

This city was not her city, this world was not her world. She felt no pride in knowing this, it was a fact. The little convent was not like an island in the center of this noisy world, but rather a kind of hole or crevice of world did not bother with something of no interest.⁹⁶

The description of the city assigns an impersonal tone to the story. Another story “Accomplished Desires” is about a young girl’s obsessive love for a professor and novelist named Mark Arber. It is set in late nineteenth century. The story primary deals with an academic and literary world. It has five sections. Each section reveals an important aspect of the story. The first section begins with Dorie’s passionate love for Mark. The first incident happens in Peabody’s Market in a suburban area. Both Mark Arber and Barbara Scott were writers of high repute. The first section also describes the girl’s college as elite and expensive where Arber works as professor. The sections second and third are set in Arber house.

It was a large, ugly, peeling Victorian home in a block of similar homes, most of which had been fixed up by the faculty members who rented them. Dorie who had her mother’s shrewd

eye for hopeless, cast-off things, believed that the house could be remodeled and made presentable.⁹⁷

The fourth section is set in Boston. Barbara drives Dorie to Boston for hospitalization because she was pregnant. She took her to a motel and arranged her stay that night. The last section depicts Dorie as the third Mrs. Arber a month after Barbara's suicide.

The stories like "Wheel of Love" "In the Region of Ice" "Heavy Sorrow of the Body," "Accomplished Desires," and "Magna Mater" have one thing in common: the academic world with all its eccentricities is the central concern.

The setting of "Heavy Sorrow of the Body" is an apartment in a city. The description of the surroundings further proves this point. "Across the back way was a factory with soot darkened windows, and behind that were other factories, great ugly buildings inside wire fences. Smoke of various hues poured out of the smokestacks and rose sluggishly into the air."⁹⁸

The above description depicts a scene of ugliness. But even in the ugliness, there is a beauty. The expression "Smoke of various hues" makes the difference. It also points out Oates's close observation of the world she breathed in. This urban setting also implies the rapid industrialization and its ill-effects on health and hygiene. Nina, the protagonist feels the outer world spiritless and clumsy. Her confusion is symbolically suggested through "the larger, more vacant lot outside the window and the factories that ringed the city, a heavy poison not to be escaped."⁹⁹

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 road to Wreszin's farmland. The dying trees and the swamps in Wreszin's farm are symbolic of meaninglessness of life. The following description for instance is evident:

Across the road a field sloped abruptly to a great mile-long swamp; it was overlaid with scum and gray, cobweb like moss that hung dispiritedly, from trees that were dying or already dead. At one time there had been a wood there, mainly oaks and elms, but construction of a new highway to the north had somehow blocked off its drainage — a process so utterly mysterious that it could not be explained to people in the area and out of how here a rich, thick scum had risen, slowly and for some inexplicable reason the trees had begun to die, dying from the inside, choked. A few were still living; most were trunks from which bark had fallen, as if peeled by hand.¹⁰⁰

The above description is suggestive of the mood of story. The farmland serves the background to most of the story is action. Mr. Wreszin is a middle-aged man who owns a large farmland. He leads a routine and boring life. He seems to be angry about everything.

However when he encounters a young girl named Ruth, he is transformed. One day he declares his love for her. And to his surprise she accepts this as an obvious consequence of her destiny. His happiness accompanied by Ruth's enthusiasm make Wreszin love the things again. He realizes the beauty of his farm and the surroundings which he ignored somehow for years.

In "Free," Lea belongs to an affluent class. Her enormous and expensive house serves as the setting to the story:

The house was enormous, in a suburb of a large Midwestern city: a white colonial with immense black shutters, built in 1870 and since then remodeled at great expense and outfitted with authentic antique furniture, Lea's mother was interested in authentic furnishing, down to doorknobs and converted kerosene lamps.¹⁰¹

"The Goddess" on the other hand depicts an incident of theft in an expensive hotel. "A Premature Biography" condenses the span of fifteen years beginning with their first meeting in 1954. The story ends in 1969. It chiefly

concentrates on the thoughts and feelings of the anonymous girl, who is the protagonist. It deals with a dispassionate love-affair.

The setting continuously shifts from one place to another. To create an illusion of reality she employs the real-life places: "Sisley Academy, Buffalo, New York to England". In brief most of the Oates's stories are set in the "Eden Country." In addition, she represents the socio-economic, cultural, psychological and religious aspects in her stories. Her later stories are set in suburban life modeled on Detroit.

IV. Point of View

A stage play or a live performance needs no intermediary to stand between its audience or spectators and the action. A narrator or narrative point of view is essential to tell the story, sometimes to reveal the motives of the characters and to maintain the integrity of the story till the end. A narrative perspective or point of view is the way the story is told.

"Point of view" is the technical term used to denote the way a reader should perceive a story. It is also known as perspective. First person perspective gives the reader the first hand experiences of the narrator. The type of narration appears mostly in confessional or autobiographical literature.

The analysis of the short story on the basis of point of view or perspective helps to realize the writer's secret and intense desire to express his experiences, ideas and thoughts. Various types of viewpoints appear in different chapters or sections of the novel. Since short story is not as complex as a novel, the short story writers usually use a uniform point of view, most frequently first person or third person.

Oates often makes use of third person point of view in her early stories. In "Fine White Mist of Winter," the narrator tells the experiences of Rafe Murray. He arrests a black boy and drives his car to the sheriff's office. On his

way a dangerous snowstorm breaks out. Fortunately they take refuge in the garage.

In “By the North Gate” and in “Magna Mater” Oates employs stream of consciousness technique to depict the experiences of the protagonists like Old Revere and Nora respectively. Nora is a middle-aged woman who lives now with her son Dennis. Her husband had given her divorce after several years of close relationship. However she seems not least surprised by this, not even by his immediate remarriage. Theodore Drexler marries a young woman.

“The Goddess” is told from the perspective of a third person limited point of view. It suits the routine enquiries after the briefcase of Alfred’s is stolen and the theft is reported. Nobody knows where his briefcase has gone. Alfred was sure he left it nowhere except in the room.

The limited perspective in third person gives us however, a peep into the tormented soul of Claudia, Alfred’s wife. She suffers from her husband’s whimsical behavior and his indifference toward her. She knows that the stolen briefcase contained nothing valuable. But Alfred makes a great fuss as usual. He demands urgent attention to him— to his complaints, his thought and emotions. He seems to have been caught by his own egoistical attitude towards people which only results in strained relationship and tormentation.

Oates often employs “limited omniscience especially in stories like “Pastoral Blood,” “In the Region of Ice” and in “Wheel of Love.” It helps to provide a peep into the soul of the protagonist or the central character.

V. Style

Every writer has a peculiar style of his own. The analysis of short stories is incomplete without some understanding of the style of the writer. It is an indispensable part of his personality. It makes or mars the success of any

literary work he produces such as stories, poems, novels, dramas and scores of others.

Writing is not mere affluence of words. It is an art and it takes years to master it. A writer selects his words and expressions meticulously to maintain, clarity and unity of expression. Writing a short story is a skillful exercise. It puts more restrictions on the economy and uniqueness of expression. It denotes use of literary devices such as metaphorical expressions, images, symbolism, innovative approaches to the art and craft of a narration, parallelism, repetition and several others.

Joyce Carol Oates took great pains to bring the desired effect according to the subject-matter or central idea. *By the North Gate*, her first volume of stories, includes stories of the old world. In 'Swamps' for instance, she depicts the old man's optimism, recording some of the incidents in his life: "Why boy," Hamp said, "it was your granddaddy saved that feed mill by hisself, fightin' the fire by hisself! Couldn't get nobody much to help but me an' them damn fool Powell brothers, an' Jenk hisself gone away, on account of everybody was mad at Jenk."¹⁰²

Although he hated Jenk on account of some personal misunderstanding, he retains his goodness. He saved his feed mill bravely without anyone's help. This goodness itself suggests the immortal ideals of generosity, compassion and love for humanity prevalent in the Old World. The above extract also reveals the language of peasants of the Eden country. It points out the kind of rural language spoken in the Northern region. Oates always describes her surroundings with a deliberate aim. She provides her vision of deterioration and loss. Grandfather's house, for instance, gives the vision of disorder:

All about the cabin, trees and bushes crowded inward, not as if they were trying to overpower the little house, but as if the house belonged with them, had some how grown up out of the ground with them. All around the house, scattered in the yard,

there were piles of junk— pieces of wood, whole sections of boards nailed together, ropes, halters, parts of the machines, a tire from a tractor, chicken wire.¹⁰³

The old man's house is symbolic of his confused life. It also symbolizes his weakening because of old age. In another story "By the North Gate," there an old man named Revere. His name represents the nostalgia for the old world. It is evident from his vision : "Then the discomforting scene changed to a fine white mist and he felt himself rising through it as if through water; rising soaring to air, to life, having cheated death at least one more day."¹⁰⁴

She painstakingly presents the reality in her stories. She employs vivid symbols and images to give it a lyrical quality. "Pastoral Blood" for instance, suggests the theme of self liberation through self-annihilation. Grace belongs to an affluent class. She leaves her house in search of identity. She wishes desperately to become free from all possible confines. To depict this, Oates appropriately inserts an image of a bird: "On the roof a cardinal cried out to her, a series of harsh, arrogant, proud notes, "Pretty bird!" Grace exclaimed.¹⁰⁵

The bird on the roof serves as the symbol of freewill and independence. A woman however gets caught in several confines especially after the marriage. Grace learns this danger and leaves her house seven days before her marriage with Tom.

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.

And in the background a mechanical girl, staring and beautiful, fleshless yet nicely human, with an arm sweetly extended and moving slowly back and forth displaying on one finger a diamond ring. The mechanical girl flaunted her purity: She wore white draped about her boneless, perfect body; her

lovely throat lifted untouched to her serene, knowing face. How worthy I am of love! She might have been thinking.¹⁰⁶

The image of mechanical girl has many implications. It suggests first of all the baseless manners and customs and ethical constraints which makes human life beautiful and cultured but it is apparently without life. The mechanical girl has all the grace but is lacks life. Similarly a woman like Grace in the story becomes an object of male desire.

Her life becomes mechanical and aimless. The image therefore suggests her confinement. The mechanical girl is pure and untouched. It is because she is without flesh and soul. It is not possible with human beings particularly with a woman. A woman can not become confined and at the same time remain pure and passionate inducing desire. If she agrees to do this she becomes an object. Her life becomes mechanical and meaningless. Further in "Ruth" there appears an image of a puddle. Wreszin's children imagine that:

They had been brought up to think of their lives as taking place in a kind of puddle that was always getting smaller. Nobody ever told them this in fact Wreszin tried hard to make them think everything was good, but they knew somehow that the puddle was shrinking and they might drown in air they weren't ready for.¹⁰⁷

The above image is symbolic of the confined or closed universe. It is suggestive of the meanness and loss of the meaning of life in the hostile world. Oates has a rare gift of presenting the reality in a very beautiful manner. Her narratives have lyrical quality. In "The Fine White Mist of Winter" For instance she describes the snowstorm as:

He was looking at the snow, the crazy whirling of flakes. Not that these seemed infinite, or even numerous – they looked instead simply like a constant shuffling and reshuffling of the same flakes, the same specks, gleaming back at him like little white eyes in the glare of the headlights. On either side they fell away into a mass of gray, like a cloud.¹⁰⁸

Similarly, in the story entitled “Ceremonies,” Oates describes the incident of fire so vibrantly that the scene becomes visible in mind’s eye:

The barn fell slowly but spectacularly sparks exploded outward tuffs of hay flew up like handfuls of light tossed playfully into the air whole boards seemed to flout outward onto the darkened sky turning slowly and high on top of the great body of fire and heat the burring hay seemed to lie suspended in air, almost rigid, in that breathless instant before it fell, breaking up into lines and half circles and twisting designs.¹⁰⁹

She presents a vivid picture of reality. The description of fire also appears in the story , “ By the North Gate”:

At first he had thought the barn was on fire, but running out as far as the pump he could see that only the grass in the field behind the barn was burning. The wind came from the northwest, from the mountains far to the north and gently tanned the flames.¹¹⁰

Oates introduces visions and dreams to evoke the tone and atmosphere of the story. In “Fine White Mist of Winter,” Rafe somehow finds a shelter. The storm makes him crazy to a maddening degree. Gradually he learns that the storm would not end so soon. He has a sudden vision of death. He recalls an incident about an old man caught in the school house: “There was one caught in a school house, one old man, he’d sleep there to when a storm come on and he couldn’t get home, and burned all he could – books and desks and all.”¹¹¹ This vision makes him anxious about his life.

In “Free,” Lea Gregg, a teenage girl is troubled by a loss of identity. She suffers from her mother’s passion for antiques. She always tried to recreate the world of the past. It becomes an obsession with her: It makes Lea’s childhood miserable. “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.”¹¹²

The above description also suggests Lea's condition. Lea is almost similar to the "kitten" because she can not hurt her mother. She loves her as a mother but feels suffocated by her peculiarly suburban passion for authentic furniture. It is symbolic of fixed universe. An image of how modern lives confine themselves into it. The image of this confinement is suggestive of the selfish and narrow-minded attitude of the aristocratic class. In "The Goddess" Oates represents the conflict in the mind of the protagonist through the image:

There was the illusion, for some reason of movement, motion. The dark-tinted-plate glass strips in the other building reflected the Sherwood plaza, but in a multi-layered, jagged, unsequential way, as if someone had shaken both buildings and outlines, the spaces between outlines were not yet settled. Patterns swayed and did not come to rest." ¹¹³

This image of confused nature of reality or illusion reveals the conflict in the mind of Claudia about her existence. She has hallucinations that the briefcase will be returned tomorrow to her. She also dreams that:

The fresh-air vent in their room went off, then on again, then off ...she imagined she could smell smoke . . . and she almost would have rejoiced at the possibility of a fire. How just that would be, if the hotel burned to the ground! . . . but innocent people like Alfred and she and the other guests would suffer, as they always suffered, while the others would escape. That was always the case. Since those people had nothing to lose they were free and could escape. . . . ¹¹⁴

Thus the description records the visions of destructions as well as distortion of values. Oates describes her characters in such vivid details that they almost visibly appear as real persons. In "Ceremonies" For instance, she describes Elizabeth as:

The girl, however about five, drew her beauty from more conventional sources. She had a tangle of black curls that the women supposed had never been combed through and a black eyed, innocent, fine lashed look of sweetness she wore a party dress of blue satin with a skirt so buoyed up by petticoats that it stuck out almost horizontally; it had layers and layers of white

beneath it, and strips of lace and pale blue ribbon. She ever had little white gloves! ¹¹⁵

Similarly, she delineates the character of Mr. Berkman, a schoolteacher with swift strokes of details. The poetic quality of her prose is evident from the bizarre vision of the protagonist of "The Goddess." Oates describes her visions of destructions and the criminal intentions in a very graceful manner.

She was entirely innocent, entirely safe – if she had prowled the corridors of the Sherwood plaza and defaced the walls, if she had wrecked the plumbing in one of the restrooms, if she cared, someday, to drop a lighted match into a trash bin, she would be utterly safe. ¹¹⁶

Another aspect of Oates's style is the use of allusions. Oates often inserts poetic lines, bits of songs or epigraphs in her works. In "Swamps" for instance she introduces a song:

*Swamp fire burin' all the night.
long way home, a long way home
Burning like my soul a fire....
A long way home fore I can rest.* ¹¹⁷

The fourth line of this song is reminiscent of Robert Frost's famous lines "And miles to go before I sleep" in his poem *Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy evening*. In "In the Region of Ice", Weinstein alludes to Shakespeare's vision of death through Claudio's speech to his sister in *Measure for Measure*:

*To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed Ice,
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about* ¹¹⁸

These lines signify the symbolism in the title of the story. It also implies her disillusionment.

To sum up, Oates employs various techniques in the short stories such as the traditional plot development to project ironically the most disturbing

aspects of modern reality. She begins her early stories often with the ironical expression, “Some *time ago in Eden country...*” It implies that the “Eden” is in a sordid barbaric and therefore an unbearable country to live in. Experiments in her plots are primarily the deviation from the existing way of writing short stories such as separation of the major events of the story into various sections, lack of chronological order or reverse chronological order.

Her protagonists are varied and not always essentially female. Male characters dominate in her early stories. They appear as shrewd, boastful and possessive. Female characters on the other hand, are rather detached, and agitated. They primarily 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 could 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.

In brief, Oates’s meticulous use of words and expressions, choice of themes, and the method of presentation is always unique. It is this aspect of style that amuses surprises and delights the reader. It is not easy to deal with her style objectively. Oates’s brilliant prose and her observation of human nature leave a magical spell on the reader.

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