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Tales of Heart: Askesis in Joyce Carol Oates

Abstract

The word 'text' has acquired a diverse meaning over the period of time. Though the postmodern texts debunk certain conventions, they cannot be separated from what T. S. Eliot proclaimed it as the 'literary tradition.' Harold Bloom's postulation of the revisionary is concerned with the movement of writers towards or away from the influence of great/prominent writers, and it might be seen as an annex to the formulations of Eliot. Considering these standpoints, this article (i) focuses on how askesis, one of the revisionary ratios of Bloom, has become a useful entry point into exploring the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Joyce Carol Oates (ii) Substantiates how Oates wrestles with her strong precursor to ascertain her aesthetic expression (iii) Establishes how askesis allows readers to examine and fill in the indeterminate blanks in the text, and simultaneously, (iv) determines how askesis subscribes to/supplements the formulation of intertextuality as a literary theory.

Keywords: Askesis; Bloom's revisionary ratios; Gaze, Intertextuality; Joyce Carol Oates; Postmodern narrative

Asceticism is a sort of exasperated and reversed obedience that has become egoistic self-mastery. Let's say that in asceticism there is a specific excess that denies access to an external power. (Foucault, 2007, pp.207-208)

Literature has been unveiling the possible eccentric contingencies of life with the aid of language. Language shapes the thinking and the vivid imagination of writers, who connect with the readers emotionally, and it also enables them to create an eclectic form of fic-

tional realms. Analyzing the aesthetic elements of language unravels the ways in which texts are similar to and different from each other. While analyzing, readers look into (sometimes are reminded of) and gather the elements that might have influenced and enabled the writers in the construction of the text under examination. Readers are expected to be mutual, and their adherence to the cooperative principle opens up some new shades of meaning in the whole arena of meaning-making process. The presence of such elements exhibit texts as a bewilderingly redolent space where the abstract, reticent and ineffable ideas are delineated through the impeccable use of language.

However, the presence of influence need not make writers less original. In fact, the texts that are newly constructed reconcile the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious, the real and the unreal, and the communicable and the incommunicable. The weak links between the signifier and the signified in the sign system of language strengthen the representation of the unconscious, the illusionary-real and the incommunicable drives within the discourse of the text. The uncertainty in the sign system paves way for the emergence of multiple signifieds for a signifier, eventually leading to different shades of meanings. Readers, while reading a fictional work, establish a link between the text they are reading and the text that exists already in their minds to elude the indispensable arbitrariness of language. While doing so, they are involved in the process of substituting a new shade of meaning for the existing patterns of texts. Thus, any text, as a matter of fact, can be linked with some prior text(s), and the transpositional change in meanings can be ascribed to the context.

Over the period of time, the word 'text' has acquired a diverse meaning. However, the legacy of considering the text as a mimetic product can be traced back to the time of Plato and Aristotle. This idea, of a 'text' being dependent on 'other texts,' has been constantly retold in many ways. In this context, Saussure's notion of language [text being the space where language is used] as a sign system that acquires possible relations is crucial in understanding what intertextuality is. To M. M. Bakhtin, any utterance [in that case, text is a product of multiple utterances] is an inevitable result of "dialogized heteroglossia." (Castle, 2007, p.185) It was Julia Kristeva (1980, p.36) who, in her essay *The Bounded Text*, combined the ideas of

Saussure and Bakhtin, and identified the text as “*productivity*.. a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.” Considering a text as a constituent of a network of texts and the culminating indeterminacy of meaning are therefore pivotal in analyzing the development of intertextuality as a theoretical framework.

With the emergence of postmodernism, texts are often constructed against the grain of traditional approach. The playfulness of postmodern text both unravels the internal dynamics of and critically examines the indeterminate ellipsis found in the text. Thus, the plane of fiction building in the postmodern context is inclined towards intertextuality. Analogous to these perceptions on text, Bloom (1975, p. 106) writes in *Kabbalah and Criticism*:

Texts don't *have* meanings, except in their relations to other texts, so that there *is* something uneasily dialectical about literary meaning. A single text has only part of a meaning; it is itself a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts. A text is a relational event, and not a substance to be analysed.

Bloom's notion of intertextuality does not stop with 'text' – 'the product'. His groundbreaking work *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* substantiates the influence process that affects writing. What Bloom (1997, p.7) proposes as the anxiety principle states that “influence cannot be reduced to source study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images.” Bloom's proposition might be seen as an annex to the speculations of T. S. Eliot (1942, p.4) in his critical essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; “... we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his [writer's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality vigorously.” In this case, the inheritor is engaged in a creative process that not only ascertains the existence of influence, but also manifests the presence of the inheritor's intrinsic critical acumen to evade the influence and establish ingenuity.

From the standpoint of establishing ingenuity, a text becomes an intertext which, in the words of Heinrich F. Plett (1991, p. 5), “is not delimited, but de-limited, for its constituents refer to constituents of one or several other texts.” The intertext becomes a diploid that carries both the ingrained features and the constructional interrelations

between itself and other texts. Regardless of this fact, as Plett (1991, p. 6) mentions, “the intertext runs the risk of dissolving completely in its interrelations with other texts. In extreme cases it exchanges its internal coherence completely for an external one.” Such notions of intertext question the originality of the writers of intertexts, because “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.” (Eliot, 1942, 4) In order to value an artist/ a work, we “must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.” (ibid)

Endorsing the above said view, Harold Bloom, in his work *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, states implicitly the ways by which writers attempt to elude the influence of their precursors. Understanding the associability of texts is indispensable to Bloom’s conceptualization of the six revisionary ratios, namely Clinamen [corrective movement], Tessera [movement towards completion], Kenosis [movement towards discontinuity with the precursor], Daemonization [movement towards a personalized counter-sublime], Askesis [movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude] and Apophrades [return of the dead] (Bloom, 1997, pp.14-15), and each of the refers to the intensity of influence that the writers acquire from their precursors. To Bloom, presuming a text as an integrated product of determinable meanings is a critical error. He postulates in his work that misinterpreting and misreading the precursor’s poem [text] culminates in the creation of a new poem [text]. Thus, Bloom’s formulation of the revisionary ratios “involves an intertextual assessment of the patterns of misreading,” and “Intertextuality is for Bloom a product of the ‘anxiety of influence.’” (Allen, 2011, p. 134) In the light of this argument, any writer is caught in the labyrinth of influence of ‘great’ writers. This prominent influence, as Eliot insists, should be ‘positively discouraged,’ because strict commitment to the ways of the predecessors will affect the novelty of the successors. What makes the new writers succeed in combat is their ability to transform the influence of the precursor in ways which are not recognizable by the readers. Redirecting the attention of the readers to something crucial will equip the writers to defend themselves against the delinquency of rewriting.

Seemingly, the works of Joyce Carol Oates, a prolific American

writer, display her inheritance of aesthetic elements from the great American gothic fiction writer Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is remembered for his demonstration of sublimed horror and mystery, macabre, arousal of emotions and anti-closure in his stories. The setting in Poe's stories is always petrifying and "the readers can see the characters' naked souls in which they may see themselves." (Sun, 2015, p.94) Such depictions enable the reader to connect the indeterminate gaps between thought and language. *The Tell-Tale Heart*, one of the most celebrated works of Poe, manifests such a macabre atmosphere, and his fictional style lingers in the minds of the readers for a long time. On the other hand, Oates's work is pervaded by what Bloom (1987, p. 6) calls the 'daemonic drive.' Her stories reveal the insanity/neurosis of Americans troubled by their memories of violence. The disintegration in Oates' characters culminates from seemingly serene but tormenting everyday events.

This article purports to do a close reading of Joyce Carol Oates' short story *Give Me Your Heart* and trace the plausible intertextual underpinnings in its relation to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Also, it uses Poe's work as a touchstone to appraise the high seriousness in Oates's work. Using textual analysis as the methodology and askesis as paraphernalia, the article elaborates on how Oates, despite the influence of Poe, retains her natural endowment, and separates herself from her precursor. Further, the article establishes how askesis enables the readers to fill in the indeterminate blanks in the text, and supplements the formulation of intertextuality as a literary theory.

Tales of Heart

Poe as a precursor has exerted great influence on his descendants/inheritors. He invented new ways of expressing gothic and horror, and his adroitness continues to influence autonomous works even now. His short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* is an exemplary text opening up possibilities which alter the dimension in which a writer (Poe in this case) had envisaged the whole plot. The indeterminate gaps that Poe delegates to the readers enable them to infer myriads of meanings. For instance, Gita Rajan's work entitled "A Feminist Reading of Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*" analyses the plot with a view to disclosing the subconscious drives exhibited by the repressed fe-

male narrator in the discourse of the text. The fact that Poe has not mentioned the name/gender of the narrator has enabled Gita Rajan to assume the narrator to be a female. Such lacunas are the canon of other writers, critics and readers. While filling in these gaps, the readers and critics involve themselves in a co-operative, rather constructive, act of making meanings. “. . . what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.” (Eliot, 1942, p.5) The meanings evolve from and transform with the social and the historical context in which a text is read. However, certain texts remain ‘original’ despite the fact that all texts are part of a larger network of texts.

Poe’s influence has produced a quite few memorable writers of gothic and horror in the literary world. Joyce Carol Oates is one among those writers who has inherited the shaking effects in writing from Poe. “She,” in the words of Stuart Spencer (1990, p.42), “is fascinated with the murderers, racists, liars, sociopaths, boxers, hustlers and brutal malcontents who populate her fiction. She strips them down and lays them bare.” At this juncture, a synopsis of *Give Me Your Heart* is crucial in understanding how the portrayals of the conjuring dread and the anxieties have been perpetually inherited by Oates from Poe. The story is a visceral wallop, an epistle written by a woman who was rebuffed by Dr. K —, a biblical scholar. Obsessed with the ‘love’ for him, she writes to him after twenty-three years. The story opens up and closes with the woman making an appeal to Dr. K — for what was promised to her years before: “I want only your heart” (Oates, 2010, p.1). Her impulsive and paradoxical language in the letter hints at a secret revenge that she has planned years later. She identifies herself as ‘Angel,’ a name known only to her and Dr. K —, and sets aside the idea of revealing Dr. K —’s name too. However, her missive includes the narration of occasions when both of them passed in close proximity. She also describes how she has watched him being happy with his wife, and even granddaughter, at various places. The proclivity of the plot deviates from a sympathetic fervor in the beginning to a vindictive passion towards the end.

It is the vivid description that Oates employs in her short story that keeps her in parallel with Poe. She seems to be engrossed herself in *askesis* in this story. ‘Askesis’ is derived from the Medieval Latin *asceticus* or Greek *askētikos*. Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the mid 17th century ‘ascetic’ as “practicing strict self-denial as

a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline.” (Merriam-Webster) Deriving inspiration from the Greek philosophers, Bloom (1997, p.116) defines askesis as “a way of purgation intending a state of solitude as its proximate goal. Intoxicated by the fresh repressive force of a personalized Counter-Sublime, the strong poet [writer – Oates here] in his [her] daemonic elevation is empowered to turn his [her] energy upon himself [herself], and achieves, at terrible cost, his [her] clear victory in wrestling with the mighty dead [Poe].” Oates, like Poe, uses gothic and horror to interpret and redefine the ideas of control images and erotic gaze. As Oates asserts in one of her interviews, “hatred and resentment and bitterness, and even a desire for violence, are a necessary response, a healthy response, for people who’ve been so ill-treated.” (Spencer, 1990, p.42) The solipsism that separates Oates from Poe lies in her ability to reinforce the voyeurism and silent images of women in her writings. *Give Me Your Heart*, when read as an intertext, substantiates ‘scopophilia’ and ‘gaze’ as a means of coercion.

The strategy used by Oates in this particular story seems to be stoic askesis. Stoic askesis is one of the many possible forms of ethical askesis. Foucault (2005, p.16) defines ethical askesis as “a work of self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of ascesis (askesis).” A strict adherence to ethical askesis instigates the need for a particular way of living. However, the ways of living may differ. An individual may be a stoic (one who tolerates the eccentricities in others and manipulates a survival strategy) or become a renegade. According to Shaun Miller (2017), stoicism’s view of askesis is powerful. Askesis, in stoicism, refers to the “techniques of the self.” Askesis will not diminish the innate response rather, if duly practiced, will stimulate transformations in writers. Validating this view, Bloom (1997, p.121) states that in askesis “The realities of other selves and of all that is eternal are diminished alike, until a new style of harshness emerges, whose rhetorical emphasis can be read off as one degree of solipsism or another.” Thus, a writer gets an accurate picture of the priming required to individuate her/him and her/his works.

Purgation and Solipsism in Oates

Poe is known for his precision of language that packs gratuitous slights leading to violent retributions. As Dan Shen (2008, p. 322) contends, “Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843) displays a characteristic interaction among a structurally unified dramatic irony, an implicit moral, and Poe’s response to the contemporary controversy over the ‘insanity defense.’” The terrible deeds, the disgust and the ghastly crimes and events in Poe’s narratives provide us with cogent traces of psychology, both convergent and divergent. The invisible fears and the inner voices, the use of the pronoun ‘I’, the confessions of the narrator, the descriptions of the ‘eye’ and the beating of the old man’s ‘heart’, and the delineation of the incisive crime in *The Tell-Tale Heart* attribute a unique charm to his plot. The horror and the shock effects in his plots are achieved by the emotive language. Tracing the affects/effects actually reveals the subconscious realm, the disintegration of personality in, and the varying disposition of characters.

Invariably, the writings of Poe are suffused with épater – the startling or shocking effect. The literary shock effects emanated from his works are integral in analyzing the emotions that stimulate a reconsideration of the storyline. The sublimed grotesque remains the anchoring principle in Poe’s writing. The sense of suspense and macabre imbued in his works have been influential in shaping the writings of many great writers. *The Tell-Tale Heart* is infused with strong feelings of nervousness, guilt, love and disgust. Infiltrated by such strong feelings, readers incline towards the emotional effect that the text produces and embrace their involvement in the meaning-making process.

The thematic appropriation of Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart* in her story *Give Me Your Heart* has enabled Oates to secure a position in the genealogy of Poe. *Give Me Your Heart* is the story of Angel, a normal woman turned into a femme fatale. Also, it seemingly exposes the dark abyss – the hidden chambers – of Dr. K —’s heart. The acutely nostalgic letter unfolds with the female narrator, Angel, making an appeal to Dr. K — after “Twenty-three years, nine months, and eleven days” (Oates, 2010, p.1). She somehow learns that Dr. K — has generously signed a living will. She claims for Dr. K —’s heart, a precious organ, both literally (for she is supposed to have

a malfunctioning heart) and metaphorically (for she is supposed to get what was long promised). Oates, through Angel, projects how disintegration at an earlier stage makes human personality obsessive and fervent. The guilt-stricken nervousness that is obvious in Poe's story is subtle in Oates's plot. Right from the application made to Dr. K —, a potential heart donor, a sense of irony runs throughout the storyline. At certain places, readers might also sense Angel threatening Dr. K —: "(I guess you might not be aware that you're destined to die soon? Within the year? In a 'tragic,' 'freak' accident, as it will be called?" (Oates, 2010, p. 2)

Oates, like Poe, projects the complexity of disgust, a negative emotion. At the same time, she undergoes purification by writing about the natural and aesthetic feeling of disgust suffused with love. She resists the influence of Poe's sublimed grotesque, and moves towards a culturally sensitive approach of gothic and horror. The title *Give Me Your Heart* is illustrative of the story's overall emotional disposition. Angel's epistle is filled with honorific terms, pronouns, phrases expressing endearment, emotional closeness/distance and reduplication, italicized font, deviant stress patterns, and double quotes. It not only evokes empathy and marks self-deprecation, but also instills curiosity and suspense in readers.

Instinctively, seeing and recognition come before reading. This seems to be the predominant principle employed by Oates in her story, and it is with this drive the readers find the story fascinating. Angel builds the momentum of revenge slowly in her letter. Though it is uncertain whether the letter has reached or will reach Dr. K —, Angel points to the minute departments of Dr. K —: "Fumbling, you turn to the last page of this letter to see my signature – Angel –and you're forced to remember, suddenly . . . With a pang of guilt." (Oates, 2010, p.2) She reads, probably imagines, his reactions like the one who has watched him closely for years. Oates emphasizes on the voyeuristic pleasure of 'seeing without seen' and the torments that culminate from the consciousness of constant surveillance.

Further, Angel recollects in the letter her amorous moments with Dr. K —. She expresses how she had been an object of voyeuristic pleasure, and how Dr. K — "devoured" her to gratify his "zestful appetite." (Oates, 2010, p.5) When Dr. K — was gone, she stoically reconciled her loss. She records the various 'private moments' of Dr. K —, for instance the so-called accidental death of Dr. K

—’s first wife, his discreet decision to marry his second wife, and more recently, his time with his granddaughter at the State Museum of Natural History. She even threatens him stating, “I might have pushed you down . . . you’d have thrown off balance, fallen backward, with an expression of incredulous terror . . . toppling down the marble steps with a scream: concussion, skull fracture, brain hemorrhage, death!” (Oates, 2010, p. 6) The metamorphosis that Angel exhibits in the story can be compared to the myth of Pandora’s Box and the resultant vices. Angel is filled with obsession and curiosity. While the latter foments her to spy on Dr. K —, the former thrusts her into a labyrinth of complicated problems (that germinated from her commitment to Dr. K —) and transforms her ‘self.’

Relatably, Angel acquires power from the knowledge she has accumulated from her secret observations of Dr. K —. With this, Oates reverses the traditional role of a voyeur, and the plausible emotional effects that emanate from the story solicit critical perspectives on the practice of objectifying women into mere objects and the conceptual framework of gaze and reverse gaze.

Angel’s endurance and patience have equipped her to enter a tranquil realm. She seems to be self-possessed and content. She says, “. . . through diligence and industry, through self-deprivation and cunning, I made my way in a field traditionally dominated by men and achieved what might be called a minor, local success.” (Oates, 2010, p.7) She is an adept professional who managed to recover from Dr. K —’s cruelty. She has embraced stoic asceticism. However, on a closer inspection it is conspicuous that Oates’s story is filled with cynicism too.

“I might work in or even oversee a medical laboratory to which your physician sends blood samples, biopsy tissues samples, et cetera, and one day he sends our laboratory a specimen extracted from the body of renowned Dr. K —. *Whose life may depend upon the accuracy and good faith of our laboratory findings.*” (Oates, 2010, p. 7)

The obsession that Angel hoards is a reflection of the female rage at mistreatment and exploitation.

“Are you shocked to learn that a woman can be professional - can have a career that’s fairly rewarding - yet still dream of justice after twenty-three years? Are you shocked to learn that a woman might be married, or might have been

married, yet remain haunted still by her cruel, deceitful first love, who ravaged not only her virginity but her faith in humankind? (Oates, 2010, pp.7-8)

By intruding into the privacy of Dr. K —, Angel threatens to immobilize him. She says that she could hear the throbbing of his heart – “the guilty organ” (Oates, 2010, p.2) that belonged to her – with a sinister intention. She discusses in detail how she has lost her youth, beauty and the innocence of a good soul. She compares herself with the sole species of Araneidae, the happy spider, that rejoices in the free will “with a sharp venomous sting, sometimes lethal to human beings” (Oates, 2010, p.4). “Cobwebs can be symbolic of confusion, of being caught in something from which one cannot escape.” (“The Cobweb”) As Jana Garai has proposed, cobweb “is also a symbol of mischief and malice for its toxic venom and the slow death it causes, which is often seen as a curse.” (Wikipedia Contributors) The epistle serves as an indication of Angel’s transition from a beauty to a beast. Her stringent criticisms emerge from her double-edged appreciation for Dr. K —. She hints at how his theological treatise entitled ‘The Ethical Life: Twenty-First-century Challenges’ has failed to bear witness to his inherent qualities of mind and character.

You, Dr. K —, the man, are not the individual who appears in your books; the books are clever pretenses, artificial structures you’ve created to inhabit temporarily, as a crippled, deformed individual might inhabit a structure of surpassing beauty, gazing out its windows, taking pride in posing as its owner, but only temporarily. (Oates, 2010, p. 6)

Angel also elaborates on how she deliberately missed the deadly opportunities that might have caused “concussion, skull fracture, brain hemorrhage, [his] death!” (Oates, 2010, p.6) In this way, Oates registers the gradual loss of innocence in Angel and demarcates the points of her disintegration that have led her to be obsessive and demented. She accentuates how Dr. K —, a renowned theologian, who is supposed to be the embodiment of rectitude, has ruined the life of an innocent woman. With the sense of mystification that runs throughout her letter, Angel transcends being a stereotypical victim, and becomes a prototype of femme fatale.

It is obvious that the stratagem of the protagonist is to enumerate the infirmities of Dr. K — through her confessions. Bearing witness to events “is an ethical practice of the self in which memory and

justice become linked.” (Munro, 2014, p. 1136) When justice is denied, the self-embraces cynic self-transformation. Angel’s tactic, in a broader sense, has culminated from the practice of ethical askesis. Her stoic acceptance of suffering through the years has enabled her to be self-disciplined in her scheme of revenge.

More vividly, Oates delves deep into the sexual politics of looking. “One’s life bears witness, breaks, and has to break with the conventions, habits and values of society.” (Foucault, 2011, p.184) It is the subversive look of Angel that creates a harrowing ambience in the story. The letter is a metaphorical revisiting of the same event at a different point of time. It gives access to a direct gaze at an object (Dr. K —) that is simultaneously feared and desired. Angel asserts her existence as the subject through the letter. Writing as a survival strategy is prominent in Oates’ works. Angel’s letter reveals her ‘self’ which remained concealed in the socially constructed space. Her epistle not only reflects her psychological infirmity/indisposition, but also provides us with the leeway to probe into the consciousness of the tormentor-victim, Dr. K —. Further, Oates reinforces the power of being insignificant in society. Unlike Dr. K —, who is a reputed theologian, Angel has no public identity. Not being identified bestows her with a sense of partially visible and verifiable power, which she did not possess earlier.

Apparently, Oates’ work emerges as the fine product of the process of askesis, “the formation of an imaginative equivalent of the superego, a fully developed *poetic [writer’s] will*, harsher than conscience.” (Bloom, 1997, p.119) Oates’s consideration of subject position is dependent upon the context of contemporary America, and she presents the unprocessed and fragmented memories of the past without any veil. She looks at writing as a psychic experience, and in her stories, she portrays the striking American reality – the violent, repressive and tenacious patterns of American life. She uses the gothic to startle the readers with multiple emotional outbursts.

Evidently, Oates’s use of gothic and horror in *Give Me Your Heart* operates at various levels. Her proficiency in writing excels because she writes of ordinary people and mundane happenings. According to her, a short story is a ‘dream verbalized’ and it helps in escalating the storyline in an effective way, where the reader unravels the thread towards the end. She insists on the fact that man is locked in the historical and the immediate certainties and can never transcend

or undo the events recorded in the archive. She swerves from Poe's traditional gothic style and uses the gothic to present the antagonistic world wherein her female character constantly battles with the amorphous 'within'. The swerve is also evident in the use of eye and heart as metaphors. In Poe's narrative, the eye, like the "eye of a vulture," and the "beating of the old man's heart" frightens and stimulates hysteria in the narrator.

His eye was like the eye of the vulture, the eye of one of those terrible birds that watch and wait while an animal dies, and then fall upon the dead body and pull it to pieces to eat it. . . . Now I could hear a quick, low, soft sound, like the sound of a clock heard through a wall. It was the beating of the old man's heart. . . . And as the sound grew louder my anger became greater and more painful. (Poe 2021)

Contrarily, Oates uses the eye and heart as metaphors to approach sexual politics.

Your heart, that guilty organ, has begun to pound . . . , you stare out anxiously . . . as I write this letter my malfunctioning heart with its mysterious murmur now speeds, now slows, now gives a lurch, in excited knowledge that you are reading these words with a mounting sense of their justice. (Oates 2010, p. 2, 11)

Clearly, the strong purgation that Oates involves in enables her to empty her own inspirations, and the solipsism allows her to know the purpose of her writing. The formation of radical subjects, practice of ethical askesis in its various forms and the delineation of resistance/survival in her writings proves her to be a writer par excellence. As a writer, she is "capable of the most exacting technical scrutiny of his [her] subject matter," and produces works "with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with maximum meaning." (Schorer, 1948, p.67) Thus, the specificity of Oates's work in the remarkable textual arrangement complements the gothic tradition.

However, the above observations may vary with readers because everyone has his/her way of reading. Meaning of a text, in this case, is determined by two essential components: Reader's knowledge of the network of texts and reader's potential to fill in the indeterminate gaps in the text and between the texts using his/her pre-understanding. "The meaning of the text is never self-formulated; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning." (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 2005, p. 47) This statement is

emphasized by Wolfgang Iser who calls such readers, who create meaning with their existing stock of experience, the actual reader.

It is obvious from the discussion that askesis and the other revisionary ratios augment the fact that the meaning of a text is unraveled with the juxtaposition of words and transposition of subject matters in a specific context. The influence of the precursors adds the intertext to the thread of previous signifying systems, and the state of solipsism obtained by the inheritors during askesis individualizes the intertext and its representation in the network of textual formations. Further, a text acquires a definite form when the reader relates her/his experience with the network of response-inviting structures. A text is then a part of the corpus that exists inclusive in the network and has an exclusive social history.

To conclude, any finished work is a resonance of textures and tones that have been crystallized. What separate the writers from each other are their quintessential techniques that compel them to attend to the subject matter objectively. The swerves that the writers take across the path of their predecessors culminate in the creation of new texts. In her work, Oates deploys the freedom of thematic and stylistic experimentation that the genre allows and she refuses to agree with the conventions of short story as a form. To her, any form can be changed into another, and a writer has to choose the effective one. Bloom (1987, p. 2) has acknowledged Oates's genius as

What I find most moving in Oates is her immense empathy with the insulted and injured, her deep identification with the American lower classes. She is not a political novelist, not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way, and yet she is our true proletarian novelist.

Following the American tradition of short stories, her captivating stories evoke feelings that are enigmatic and delineate the melodrama of the opposites. Oates not only reminds us of Poe, but also underscores the truly American experience.

Thus, Askesis gains significance in the appraisal of works by individual writers. By embracing their meritorious works, it not only allows the writers to cope with their imaginative fervor but also enables them transcend contemporariness and enter eternity like any other writer/work with high seriousness. Though the techniques differ, the forms explored and developed by writers are evaluated with-

in the literary tradition and it is to be noted that meanings cannot be derived outside the tradition.

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