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Skeletons in the Closet: Hidden Darkness in *I Am No One You Know*

In Joyce Carol Oates' America, the world is haunted by mystery and vulnerability, violence and sexuality. Between the sporadic plot twists and monotonous lives interrupted by brutal atrocities of her 50+ novels not to mention plays, essays, short stories, and poetry, Oates employs a constant dark puppetry. Yet, we cannot understand the shadows of Oates' work without first understanding until we understand Oates' own history.

Born on June 16, 1938, Oates was the oldest of three children born into "a happy, close-knit and unextraordinary family for our time, place and economic status" (qtd. in Edemariam). Despite the relative stability of her family life, however, Oates' family history was far from temperate. Her parents, Carolina and Frederic, and paternal grandmother, who she was especially close to, all grew up surrounded by violence. Her paternal grandmother, Blanche, survived an attempted murder-suicide by her own father at the age of fourteen. Her maternal grandfather was beaten to death in a tavern brawl and when her maternal grandmother was left unable to cope with raising nine children, Oates' mother was given away.

This same violence marred Oates' childhood as well. Though she was born in Lockport, New York, she would spend most of her childhood in Millersport, New York, a downtown region where violence "was so saturated in that way of life that there was no expectation of anything different" (qtd. in Neary). "The violence of her books is not so far from the reality she knew," Aida Edemariam writes.

Oates recalls witnessing “so many brutal, meaningless acts... incredible cruelty, profanity, obscenity... even (it was bragged) incest between a boy of about 13 and his six-year-old sister” (qtd. in Edemariam). In her memoir *The Lost Landscape: A Writer’s Coming of Age*, Oates describes how her childhood neighbor pleaded guilty to charges of arson and attempted murder of his family before ultimately being sentenced to prison at Attica Correctional Facility. Oates’ own sister, Lynn Ann, was diagnosed with severe autism and was kept at home until the age of 15 when “she physically attacked their ‘gentle, soft-spoken, and self-effacing’ mother and was deemed too dangerous to remain living with her parents” (qtd. in Ciuraru). Oates has not seen her since 1971.

Surrounded by this turmoil then, Oates took refuge in literature and learning. From a young age, Oates read “avidly, ardently! As if my life depended on it” (qtd. in Ciuraru). She recalls, “there were few books in our household, and those that came into my hands were precious — like the Alice books. Probably at too young an age I was reading “The Gold-Bug and Other Stories,” by Edgar Allan Poe” (qtd. in “Joyce Carol Oates: By the Book”). In fact, inspired by its “fluid blend of dreamlike narrative and surreal fantasy,” it was Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking Glass” that inspired Oates to write (“Joyce Carol Oates”). “Alice is the protagonist with whom I’ve most identified over the years,” Oates said. ‘Her motto is, like my own, “Curiouser and curiouser”’ (“Joyce Carol Oates: By the Book”).

Oates exemplified this ideology throughout her educational journey, from the one-room schoolhouse her mother attended to receiving a scholarship to Syracuse University, becoming the first member of her family to graduate high school. At Syracuse, she began writing stories, novels, plays in spiral bound notebooks, publishing her first short story in the fashion magazine *Mademoiselle* (Chapman).

After graduating in 1960 with a bachelor's degree in English, she went on to receive her master's at the University of Wisconsin before beginning her career as an English professor at the University of Detroit and the University of Windsor in Ontario. To this day, she continues that legacy as a professor of creative writing at Princeton University ("Joyce Carol Oates").

Oates' 2004 collection *I Am No One You Know* embodies her writing. Exploring topics ranging from sexual exploitation to family standards to adolescence, each story is a cautionary tale. Featuring characters that resist the temptations of their surroundings and those that succumb to them, each is a lesson in shadowed subconsciousness. Taken as a whole, *I Am No One You Know* is the ultimate critique of a world that allows monsters to walk the earth unchecked, concealed in masks of normalcy. Through her simultaneously brutal and conventional depiction of America, Joyce Carol Oates exposes the irony of hidden darkness within ordinary lives.

Set against a backdrop of perceived normalcy, Oates' stories contrast the mundane with the shockingly dark. She begins each "in familiar territory" with some version of the quintessential American suburbia; in "Aiding and Abetting," a husband and wife prepare for dinner – cooked by the wife of course – with their two little children (Bender). In "Curly Red," a woman recounts her experiences as a teen in public school. "The Skull: A Love Story" begins with an aging man in his doctoral job. These settings, though monotonous in their simplicity, are accessible to the majority. In this way, Oates appeals to the common people as "a writer of ordinary lives, of people in families" (Friedman 491). By placing her characters within these familiar situations, Oates creates a doorway, inviting "the reader to become an imaginative participant in the narrative" to her world by paralleling reality (Pickering 220).

It is all the more surprising then, when the illusion of familiarity disappears, and the haunting, even nightmarish, quality of Oates' stories is left starkly exposed. Suddenly, the

husband's dinner is interrupted with a phone call from a suicidal brother-in-law ("Aiding & Abetting), the woman's memories reveal her role in sending her brothers to prison for murder ("Curly Red"), and the approachable doctor shows a little too much fascination in a murder case ("The Skull: A Love Story"). Going from the soft lethargy of suburban life to the content of crime dramas is a slap in the face, defying all expectations. She "guide[s] us...down dark passages" into "the underside of America," an abrupt transition that becomes a reflection of the stories themselves (qtd. in "Joyce Carol Oates"). Just as the characters are jolted from the mundanity of their lives by a devolution into violence, so too is the unsuspecting reader awakened from the perceived slowness of a "regular" story. Oates lulls the reader into a false sense of security only to exploit the expectations she herself created. Instead of the stability of familiar settings, the reader is left with Oates' subtle wake-up call: as unassuming as appearances may be, there is always the potential for darkness beneath.

Through her use of seemingly normal, trustworthy characters, Oates continues to subvert expectations, further highlighting the deceptive nature of appearances. Many of the individuals she explores in her stories are people in whom we place trust – whether consciously or unconsciously. In enrolling children in school, we trust teachers to educate and prepare them for adulthood. As children, we trust our parents – even adults in general – to protect us. We trust our loved ones to support us in times of need. Oates plays upon these subtle assumptions through her characters, "baffl[ing] conventional expectations" to again display how we can never truly know those around us (Bender). "I'm Not Your Son, I Am No One You Know" features a junior high teacher renowned for cruelty towards his students, the "sunken-chested man who...teased a boy to tears...pinched, tickled, slapped a boy... playfully locked a boy in his homeroom after school. Or not so playfully: "for discipline" (Oates 34). The contrast in characterization is distinct; the

teacher we expect to be a figure of safety and protection morphs into a predator. Similarly, in “Upholstery” a girl narrowly escapes rape by her friend’s seemingly friendly uncle, an adult she looked up to, only for that admiration to be broken. In each of these relationships, the usual expected dynamic becomes distorted by the malicious actions of trusted individuals. What is traditionally a relationship rooted in faith quickly transforms into a betrayal, both of the characters’ and the reader’s trust. We are caught unawares by the paradox between our expectations and Oates’ dark reality – how could those we so blindly trust ever hide such evil – and the characters too are uprooted from their suppositions – the responsibilities people are given are not always upheld. In this sense then, Oates again shatters our presumptions, revealing that even people of trust are worthy of suspicion.

Oates furthers this contrast between appearance and actuality through her complex use of perspective. Though known for being an eclectic writer, even across changes in perspective, Oates consistently maintains two elements in *I Am No One You Know*: the ability to understand the main characters’ emotions and the darkness that haunts their consciousnesses. In “Mrs. Halifax & Rickie Swann,” the sickening story of a teacher-student affair, the wrongness of both Rickie and Mrs. Halifax’s innermost thoughts is disclosed – but in conjunction with straightforward description. Oates blends blunt statements like “Here is a fact. Rickie was receiving higher grades at school” with introspection: “*God help us. God who has sanctified our love, help us now,*” highlighting the disparity between appearance and soul (Oates 260-261). To everyone else who observes Mrs. Halifax and Rickie Swann as they are presented through Oates’ blunt statements, their interactions are nothing suspect. Take one look into their consciousness, though, and their relationship becomes tainted, their darkness revealed. What we perceive, then, is not always what we should believe. Oates showcases this same conflict throughout her

collection. From a housewife experiencing an emotional crisis that she keeps hidden from her husband in “Fugitive” to an author secretly exchanging poetry with a prison inmate via letters in “In Hiding,” Oates’ characters live double lives in a single body; they show one face to their loved ones even as they simultaneously harbor secrets whether literally – as with the letters in “In Hiding” – or internally as with Mrs. Halifax and “Fugitive.” With this ever-present dichotomy, Oates showcases the relationship between the external and internal, creating an ironic contradiction that equates normalcy with superficiality.

Oates’ experimental style demonstrates the universal nature of this contradiction. From “first-, second-, and third-person viewpoints, both male and female,” Oates explores a new viewpoint in each short story she crafts. (Mambrol). While “Jorie (& Jamie): A Deposition” depicts a dark home life through the innocent gaze of a young girl, “Me & Wolfie” looks at a similarly difficult familial relationship – this time through the eyes of an adolescent boy. Despite the changes in gender and age between the narrators of these two stories, both continue to explore issues of trauma and troubled family dynamics. The fact that Oates maintains this pattern of dark introspection even as she changes other aspects of her characters and plotlines speaks to deeper intention. The range of perspectives she employs paired with the thread of consistency emphasizes the diverse environs in which darkness can exist. These shadows are not reserved for one type of character, Oates establishes. It can exist in anyone – stranger or friend, young or old, boy or girl – and perhaps most disconcerting is how easily it can go unnoticed. Were it not for Jamie’s testimony at the deposition, no one would have ever known that her sister was as psychologically unstable as she was; the narrator and her family kept her sister “locked...in a storage room almost all the time,” kept “[the narrator’s] secrets,” acted normal in public (Oates 243-244). When Wolfie and his mom do leave the house, it is on Wawa trips or to flea markets;

his mom's alcoholism and paranoia only make an appearance when they are home. Based on how they portray themselves in public, we would assume the lives of Wolfie and Jamie are normal, would assume that we would be able to discern their sufferings. Yet, what these stories reveal is the exact opposite. The sort of darkness we think we would notice is not always as visible as we expect.

Oates' stories investigate this deceptive normalcy in everyday lives, and Oates' own life was no exception. Though her hometown was outwardly simple, "hardly a community it was a farm and another farm, and a creek" (qtd. in Edemariam), her childhood there was bathed in violence. From local farm boys harassing and assaulting children to Oates' own molestation in the fourth grade, "violence...was really not that unusual in my background...It didn't break me or wound me. I basically just accepted it – and maybe it did form some of my sense of human nature" (qtd. in Neary). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Oates' attitude towards violence in her stories is one of blunt recognition, that she depicts the United States "as a nation where violence is a fact of life"; based on Oates' experiences, it was (Mambrol).

Those same experiences form the foundation for Oates' critique of false appearances, a pattern that remains prevalent throughout her short stories. In Oates' experience, appearances hid darker realities. Small quiet towns masked unbelievable cruelty. The "golden reality" popularized by the American dream "morphed into...a fatal obsession," deadened by the violence she both witnessed and became victim to (qtd. in Chun). Understanding Oates' upbringing within the context of these contradictions, stories in *I Am No One You Know* become an extension of Oates' disillusionment with America. They reflect the disparity between surface level appearances and reality. They peel back the glamorized façade of a "normal" perception. In short, they provide the reader with a window into Oates' own worldview.

Yet even having experienced this brutality, Oates still found reason for hope, a quality she extends to her literature. Having experienced a childhood tainted with the same brutality as her stories, Oates “found in fiction... a salvation,” and in Alice, “the fierce young girl unphased by monsters and the threatening mutability of dreams, a way of going forth into the world” (Edemariam). To Oates, Alice was a symbol of hope, a “courageous, curious girl heroine” who represented the capacity to endure (qtd. in Edemariam). Oates’ characters, though much more murderous, subtly mirror Lewis Carroll’s pivotal character. Just as Alice braves the surreal world of Wonderland, Oates’ characters attempt to navigate an America haunted by nightmares. Just as Alice struggles to make sense of the nonsensical, bizarre nature of Wonderland, Oates’ characters falter in their attempts to reconcile the existence of evil within their otherwise normal lives. The part that is most empowering about Alice’s story, however, is that, despite all of the absurdities she encounters, she survives. Through the characters in *I Am No One You Know*, Oates offers the reader the same bravery that Alice gifted her. She makes it clear that, though the world we live in is by no means easy, it can be survived. In this way, through this parallel, her characters exhibit their own strength. To readers, they become their own sort of sanctuary.

Oates’ characters go beyond personal connection, however; they build upon this power as testaments of humanity’s resilience. The two kids in “Cumberland Breakdown” exemplify tenacity as they deal with the fallout of their firefighter father’s death. They feed themselves when their mother “never [comes] out for supper,” even relinquish their anger at the family their father died to save (Oates 94). In Oates’ dark world, that moment of comfort emerges as a beacon of hope. The Barndollars, Melora, and Tyrell have every reason to become the villains. The Barndollars are scorned, their house burned; Melora and Tyrell are faced with starvation, grief, a broken family. Yet, instead of giving into their anger, they join hands. They live to see another

day. From a woman bravely returning to a hometown that harbors memories of her attempted rape (“Upholstery”) to a girl escaping the capture of a serial killer (“The Girl with the Blackened Eye”), Oates allows those moments of courage to shine. As her characters continue their journeys, even in a world full of death, they persist, and it is because they have confronted violence and survived that makes their stories all the more powerful. Through them, Oates extends a reminder: that even when faced with monsters of the most horrific kind, you can continue to live and thrive. Even having seen a world of violence, corruption, the worst kinds of evil, you can still continue to brave it.

With stories full of lifestyles that both appear normal and hide darker secrets, characters that defy expectations, and an author whose own life encapsulates these dichotomies, Joyce Carol Oates’ *I Am No One You Know* is an exploration of contradictions. Through clever juxtapositions, Oates highlights the irony of darkness beneath appearances of normalcy. Suburbia can be the perfect place for a murder. Expectations of trust can mask the true nature of an individual. Darkness can make a home in anyone. The message across these variations in perspective, character, and setting, however, is simple: the America we know is not necessarily as clear-cut as it may seem. Oates asks: Are we ever able to know – much less trust – the people around us? Can anyone be truly normal? Does goodness exist in the world? The questions she poses are discomfiting, yes, but necessary. As we begin to recognize the darkness, we can learn to appreciate the good. As we look beyond outward appearance to the “mysteries beneath the surface of ordinary lives,” we can find deeper complexity (Schwartz). As we embrace the duality of our world, we can, though maybe not completely, at least begin to understand it.

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