On the Motif of Predicament in Joyce Carol Oates's *Wonderland*

Yuying Liang

Abstract

This paper analyses the protagonist Jesse's predicament that he suffers in his life-long arduous journey searching for security, protection and love. It contextualizes Jesse's experiences in a larger social reality, exploring how he struggles to survive in a tumultuous world. One of its central arguments is that Jesse's predicament is in fact intrinsically linked to complex social backgrounds involving economic, political and cultural factors. As a victim of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Jesse strives to find connections with the world and redefine his identity after his family tragedy. He lives all the way out by constantly adjusting himself to the environment and transforming himself spiritually, psychologically and intellectually to meet the new challenging situations. In his journey of searching for order and meaning for his life, Jesse encounters with several fatherly figures, namely his maternal grandfather Vogel, his adoptive father Dr Pedersen and his mentor Dr Cady, who offer respectively solipsism, megalomania and empiricism as solutions to the problems of existence. Ironically, these philosophical solutions all represent a distorted sense of the self. The solipsist Vogel refuses to offer Jesse chances to revisit his tragic past, which leads Jesse to survive with a ruptured self. The megalomaniac Dr Pedersen attempts to erase Jesse's history in order to turn Jesse into his alter ego, so as to satisfy his own morbid interest. The empiricist Dr Cady instructs Jesse to use the power of pure science as a means to control his life, but this mechanical control gets Jesse into the difficulties of self-division. Under these disassociated destructive influences, Jesse sees no hope of restoring his normal state. In his continuous struggle for self-recovery and self-fulfillment, Jesse finally, seeing no alternative under, indulges himself in the sexual pleasures with his lover Reva Denk. However, this sexual relationship does not help liberate Jesse from his dilemma, or help him transcend his worldly troubles. With the passion passing away, Jesse is forced to confront more embarrassing and difficult situations. A detailed analysis of Jesse's life trajectory reasserts the argument that Jesse's destiny is indissolubly chained to the social milieu of his times, and thus his dangerous involvement in that environment does inevitably result in his predicament that cannot be readily addressed. In this context, Jesse is bound to

become disillusioned with his pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Keywords: Social Milieu, Identity Crisis, Existential Predicament, Self-Fulfilment, Disillusionment.

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates is a prolific and versatile writer in contemporary American literary circles. Due to her unique talent and outstanding contributions to the field of American literature, Oates has received many awards and honours for her writing, including the National Book Award, the O. Henry Award, the National Humanities Medal and the Jerusalem Prize (2019). Meanwhile, she has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature several times and praised as "the finest American novelist, man or woman, since Faulkner" (Johnson xvii). Oates is extremely sensitive to such phenomena in contemporary American society, like its colliding social and economic forces, its philosophical contradictions, its wayward and often violent energies, etc. Oates pictures the United States as a seething, vibrant world in which the individuals are often subjected to disorder, dislocation and extreme psychological turmoil. Her protagonists, no matter what kinds of backgrounds they have – whether they are inner city dwellers, migrant workers, intellectuals or affluent suburbanites – all have to suffer intensely conflicts or contradictions at the heart of their cultures.

Oates presents such sufferings with scrupulous accuracy and great compassion. Johnson comments on this as "Her particular genius is her ability to convey psychological states with unerring fidelity, and to relate the intense private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life" (Johnson 8). That's to say, Oates's writing is aimed at highlighting the spiritual, sexual, and intellectual decay of modern American society. Her uniqueness lies in the fact that she associates her characters' predicament with the pressures from family and society. She generally arranges her characters in well-knit plots of familial and communal chronicles and looks at the relationships amongst the individuals, family and society as a key perspective to explain their predicament. The novel *Wonderland* (1971) starts realistically with the Great Depression and what misery it causes. Oates chooses Jesse as the protagonist to represent all the American adolescents of the times, who struggle to survive from the Great Depression to the 1970s. The story unfolds with the tragedy of Jesse's family resulting from the economic collapse. His father Willard Harte, once a vigorous

and optimistic man, is crushed by the economic plight incurred by the Great Depression. He insanely kills his entire family before turning the gun on himself. Jesse flees his father's murder but becomes an orphan. Since then, Jesse sets out on a journey attempting to restore his identity. He searches for father surrogates in hope of getting some sort of protection and support. His grandfather Vogel becomes his first surrogate father who offers solipsism as a solution to the problems of existence. His adoptive father Dr Pedersen becomes his second surrogate father, an emblem of extreme megalomania, who tries to mould Jesse into his alter ego. Dr Cady, Jesse's third father surrogate, instructs him to use the power of pure science as a means to control his life. Although these philosophical solutions to the problems of existence are different in form, they all represent a distorted sense of the self. Their influences upon Jesse are destructive rather than constructive. Seeing no alternative under, Jesse finally indulges himself in the sexual relationships with Reva Denk, who brings Jesse sexual pleasures but fails to liberate him from his worldly troubles. As moulded by so many dissociated influences, what Jesse gets is a discontinuous sense of his being, for each experience appears to be "blur, shapeless, a dimension of fog and space, like the future itself" (Oates 63).

As a consequence, Jesse is obliged to survive with a ruptured being. This paper traces Jesse's life trajectory in a tumultuous world. As a victim of the depressing times, Jesse struggles to find solutions to his existential predicament. The paper explores how Jesse's several father surrogates and his lover Reva Denk influence him in his journey of self-recovery and self-fulfilment. Based on elaborate textual interpretations, it comes to a conclusion that Jesse's predicament is in fact intrinsically linked to larger social backgrounds including political, economic and cultural factors.

Variation on the Family Life and Jesse's Identity Crisis

The novel's first book "Variation on the American Hymn" renders an unpleasant picture of the Great Depression. The economic collapse in the 1930s resulted in the longest and worst period of high unemployment and low business activities. Banks, stores, and factories were closed and left millions of Americans jobless, homeless, and penniless. Jesse's family falls victim to adversity. The protagonist Jesse feels sickened by the contingencies of everyday life, especially the bankruptcy of his father's business, his mother's unwanted pregnancy, and many more. His nauseated reactions infiltrate the early chapters of the story,

which makes an ironic contrast to the Christmas celebrations in his high school. The atmosphere is so depressing and suffocating that Oates presents it as "The air looks as if it is coming apart–shredding into molecules of sand or grit" (Oates 35). Jesse, a child at the time, feels deeply disturbed and terrified in such chaos brought by the economic depression. Before Jesse's family tragedy takes place, Oates reveals to the readers some ominous signs by exaggerating Jesse's malaise and the unusual environmental phenomena. As Oates narrates, "Behind everything is the gauzy late afternoon sky, wintry and evil, and there is nothing in that sky to give a form to the day, nothing permanent, nothing to be outlined with the eye" (63). Maddened by the frustration, Jesse's father kills his pregnant wife and his three children, he plans on killing Jesse before committing suicide. Jesse flees his father's murder. Although badly wounded, Jesse survives. He loses his whole family, becoming homeless and helpless. As an orphan in a precarious world, Jesse has to struggle to redefine himself. Despite the difficulties, Jesse sets out on a journey for self-recovery and self-fulfilment.

Jesse's Arduous Journey of Self-Recovery and Self-Fulfilment

In the epigraph of the novel, Oates quotes Borges's words,

> We … have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and external crevices of unreason which tells us it is false." (Borges 198)

Obviously, it offers an image of the primordial coil–a life's original helix. In *Wonderland*, there are many labyrinths, both symbolically and literally. Again and again, Jesse's journey of self-fulfilment is trapped in a monstrous design and sent spinning. The orphaned boy is shunted from place to place, waiting to restore stability and meaning to his life. Jesse plunges into a dark, fearful labyrinth populated by menacing authorities. He takes a trip through intricate passageways where the fugitive is vulnerable to transformations. Passing through all the rapidly changing environment, Jesse constantly adjusts himself to the new situations in order to restore the normal state of his existence. However, he is doomed to fail in a world full of contingencies and changes. In his life-long arduous Journey, Jesse meets many figures who provide him with different philosophies to deal with the problems of existence. Jesse's journey is deeply affected by these figures.

Vogel: A Solipsist's Influence on Jesse

Jesse's grandfather Vogel is the first man who provides the orphan with his first shelter. Thus, Vogel naturally becomes Jesse's first father surrogate. After leaving the hospital, Jesse comes to live with his grandfather Vogel. In Jesse's memory, Vogel is a man who always "moved in absolute silence, alone, a kind of nullity in the midst of the green corn, moving as if in a trance or a dream…" (Oates 75). Vogel is a solipsist. He grudgingly offers the boy shelter because his life creed is "People should let one another alone" (Oates 85). He represents a solipsistic solution to the problem of existence. For a solipsist, the self knows nothing but its own modifications. Vogel denies all things in his world, and tends to construct a small world only for himself. History, as well as the future, is meaningless to him. What he cares about is his own existence and the outside world has nothing to do with him. Vogel's distorted view on the being of the self is forged by his early-life experience. As Karen Horney points out, "…under pressure of crushing experiences, a detached person may become morbidly dependent" (36). Admittedly, Vogel has experienced a great deal of hardships and frustrations in his life. The unpleasant experiences have turned him into an uncommunicative, dissocial, detached and cynical person. Vogel "had no friends and had broken off ties with most of his own kin over the years, one squabble after another, the old man certain that he was right and everyone else wrong, out to cheat him" (Oates 79-80). Vogel's detachment reveals his personal disturbance brought by the dislocation of the social environment.

Although there is no communication between the grandfather and the grandson, Jesse is satisfied to live with his grandfather on the farm, for living far away from his home and staying in the deserted farm help him temporarily turn his memory away from his family's tragedy. Farm is a place located in nature. Nature in the novel can provide the characters with freedom, comfort and healing. Romantic ideas of the self suggest that nature can serve as the refuge for the self. When the self gets hurt in society, it turns to nature for healing. When Jesse's father is overwhelmed by the frustrations in his life, he often seeks consolation and relief in nature,

> *His father going out to tramp in the woods, hours before dawn*…. Once, in the Brennans' woods, he had come upon a heap of cigarette butts and ashes, and he knew this was where his father had sat, unable to stay in the house or in bed. Unable to sleep. (44)

Sleepless, restless, Harte walks into the woods and exposes himself to

nature to seek temporary relaxation. Likewise, Jesse also goes to nature to look for healing for his trauma. In nature, Jesse senses that "Everything was coming back to life" (Oates 80).

Jesse gratefully plunges into his grandfather's life and is satisfied with the partnership of silence. He wants to start a new life by devoting himself to the rhythm of "Sleep, waking, work; sleep, waking, work," so that "He would not have to think about his life because it would pass like this, one day after another, carrying him forward" (Oates 81). Jesse, placing himself in nature, seems to get some spiritual comfort, "He would spend the rest of his life like this, in the country, safe in the country, where the water and the light and the expanse of empty land could hide him…." (Oates 83). Living on the farm, Jesse forces himself to forget his tragic past, and to accommodate his emotional conditions as a survivor. Gradually, he begins to carry on his grandfather's speechless and defensive character and is deeply impressed by the life-denying principle that his grandfather demonstrates. Day in and day out, Jesse establishes a kind of odd partnership with his silent grandfather. Neither of them mentions a word about Jesse's miserable past.

However, the coming of spring awakens Jesse's memory. His family's possessions stacked in his grandfather's barn reminds him of his tragic experience and arouses his self-awareness. He gropes his way back to his past life by asking his grandfather to let him see his family's properties in the barn, which symbolizes the remnant of his shattered identity. Jesse yearns for evidence of his own history, represented by these preserved possessions. However, his grandfather refuses to comply with Jesse's entreaty, which leads to a conversation between Jesse and his grandfather: That evening, after supper, he said to his grandfather, "Can I look at those things in the barn? My parents' things?"… His grandfather looked away. "You better leave all that alone." … "Please"…"No"…"I said no" (Oates 83-84).

Vogel turns down Jesse's request to come to terms with his past. For a solipsist, the need is a violation of the principle of existence. His refusal means his denial of Jesse's past and his present existence as well. Even though Jesse can accommodate his emotions as a survivor by living in such a morbid condition, denying his longing for his own past is a cruel means to deprive him of chances to restore his normal state of existence. So much the worse, the old man even breaks the protective silence to lash out at Jesse's dead parents viciously and bitterly, spitting out his disgust as:

> "You're like *her*," the old man said suddenly, sneering.
>
> … "Like her, just like *her*! You don't let trouble alone; you hunt it out! All right, go after it, marry it, lay down with it, but when you get up again all filthy don't come to me – you get what you deserve. Don't come to me for help, any of you!" … "… I knew what *he* was, your father, the first time I saw him. I knew. And that day came out here and tore up the land and I called the police on him, I knew what he was, everybody knew –." (Oates 84-85)

Intolerable, Jesse finally decides to leave his grandfather. He thus severs the old Vogel's influences, but he once again falls into a state of identity crisis. Jesse understands what his past means to him, so he strives to find it back. Unfortunately, some unfavourable factors impede him to reunite his present being with his traumatized past. Meanwhile, the violence act of his father and the negative posture of his grandfather exclude him from a normal condition of existence, namely the normal family life. As a result, his ruptured history throws him into more miserable, isolated and depressed situations.

Jesse comes back to his late father's deserted house. He spends a night in the empty house in hope of renewing his roots. He says to himself that "*I'm here, I'm here, I'm here. Jesse Harte is here, a survivor*" (Oates 87). This homeless boy is reduced to viewing survival as a triumph, a victory. The "closed" sign that his father placed on the property before he perpetrated the family tragedy has been replaced by a board imprinted with words as "For Sale." The change at once indicates his orphaned state and an uncertain future ahead. Hence, he has to continue to find new connections for his ruptured self.

Dr Pedersen: A Megalomaniac's Influence on Jesse

Dr Pedersen is taken as the darkest figure in the novel. He is actually an eclectic mystic-doctor-philosopher who believes in the godlike potential of the human organism. He claims that man can achieve his potential by ceaselessly striving to become his fullest self, the self he is fated to be. He views himself as a benevolent deity. Ironically, his photo appears on the cover of a Sunday supplement magazine, and the report is with a headline as "Scientist or Mystic?–Dr Karl Pedersen of Lockport" (Oates 146), which recounts his supernatural powers and in which he is described as a diagnostician with the ability to see and assess all illnesses. He repeatedly claims that his fate is to displace God. Echoing Nietzsche's concept of the higher man, Pedersen says to Jesse, "To displace God is not easy. To be

higher, a higher man, that is not an easy fate" (Oates 136). Dr. Pedersen's obesity, wealth, and spiritual deformity imply the most extreme form of individualism, for obesity being the physical correlative of megalomania. It suggests the consequences of the cultivation of absolute self. Based on his ideas of higher man and absolute self, Dr. Pedersen pursues perfection, as revealed in his conversation with his daughter Hilda, "Perfection is difficult, Hildie, but ultimately it is not as difficult as imperfection … It is necessary to be perfect …" (Oates 170). He combines his belief in science, fate, and God with a cosmic sense of American Manifest Destiny, as he always says, "American is blessed by God. American is all men, all humanity, blessed by God and pushing outward, always outward, as we yearn for another world, we yearn to be assimilated into God as into a higher protoplasmic essence" (Oates 140). Indeed, in spite of his eccentricities, Dr Pedersen is an archetypal American in his disregard of the past and his unyielding belief in progress, in the betterment of the self, and the unique and blessed fate of the American people.

Dr Pedersen's influence upon Jesse is extremely destructive. When meeting Jesse in the orphanage, Dr Pedersen asks him a series of questions, and amongst which, the most thought-provoking one is "How do you … intend to confront the riddle of existence?." Jesse answers it tactfully, "By … going as far as I can go, as far as … my abilities will take me" (Oates 102). Pedersen is certainly satisfied with Jesse's answer, for he is sure that Jesse is still a boy who hasn't been defined, and therefore he can mould Jesse in the ways he wishes. Dr Pedersen makes Jesse believe that he adopts Jesse completely out of his beneficence, as he seemingly says, "You must be saved. You must be fed, clothed, sheltered, guarded, loved. You must be loved …" (Oates 103). In fact, Dr Pedersen is not satisfied with his own children. Although they are mentally extraordinary, they disappoint him for they have been deformed by their father mentally. Therefore, they are no longer capable of living up to Dr Pedersen's expectation for perfection. To compensate for this regret, Dr Pedersen selects Jesse to fulfill his desire for perfection. Dr Pedersen offers Jesse not only a name but nurturance, which ends Jesse's homeless state. However, in Dr Pedersen's family, Jesse is inevitably doomed to suffer other kinds of predicaments, that is the loss of his independent self, for Dr Pedersen intends to fashion Jesse into the being that the former likes.

Presiding over the dinner table, Dr Pedersen offers Jesse a reprieve from his protean history. Mealtimes seem to be the magic time of communion for one

like Jesse who is so eager for security and protection. Dr Pedersen gives Jesse, a boy who feels undefined and undetermined, exactly the message he wants to hear. Dr Pedersen says, "There is a small statue of yourself in your body, and it is that statue you must observe. Stability. Certainty. You will have the patience and the faith of concrete" (Oates 118). Here, Dr Pedersen conveys a pseudo-salvific message. His words sound sacred, and thereby Jesse feels somewhat transformed. Jesse tries to absorb what Dr Pedersen says, and soon after he becomes a Pedersen not only in name but also in spirit, "echoing his rhythmic pauses, emphasizing certain words…. It was uncanny how he drew himself up into a boy who was so precise and articulate, who spoke almost in the voice of an older man" (Oates 153). In this way, Dr Pedersen successfully turns Jesse into his alter ego.

Jesse is aware of the possible risks but reluctant to resist the influence of Dr Pedersen. Jesse needs Dr Pedersen's manipulative mechanism, because, when compared with Dr Pedersen's manipulation, Jesse is more terrified of "being excluded from the family of men, jostled about on the streets by people in a hurry, people in crowds, with their own families back home, private lives that excluded him permanently…." (Oates 203). As a young and immature boy, combined with his desperate needs for identification and belonging, Jesse enjoys his stay with the Pedersen's. Unlike his adoptive mother and his sister Hilda, Jesse does not dislike the usurpation of his independent self by Dr Pedersen. On the contrary, he is seen to pray at times, "Let me be like them, let them love me, let everybody know that I am one of them" (Oates 111). Gradually, Jesse appears to be obedient to everything imposed on him by Dr Pedersen.

In response to Dr Pedersen's control strategy, Jesse takes up a kind of submissive strategy. This has much to do with his early experiences. Due to his unusual way of being orphaned, Jesse survives with a trauma. He becomes homeless, disoriented and dislocated, drifting in a rapidly changing world. In a world filled with uncertainty, Jesse strives to seek shelters and redefine his life. In order to overcome the feelings of being unsafe, unloved, and unvalued, Jesse elaborately designs the defensive strategies to cope with the adverse situations. When faced with Dr Pedersen's control strategy, Jesse tends to accept it stoically. Horney gives her observations on the case as "the compliant type, manifests all the traits that go with 'moving toward' people. He shows a marked need for affection and approval and an especial need for a 'partner'–that is, a friend, lover, husband or wife 'who is to fulfill all expectations of life and take

responsibility for good and evil, his successful manipulation becoming the predominant task'" (Horney 41-42). Jesse is unfortunately left orphaned in a precarious world which is characterized by such negative terms as hypocrisy, crookedness, jealousy, cruelty, greed, and the like. Jesse must disguise himself accordingly to cope with the challenging situations. Irving Malin claims that "Many American heroes find that they cannot adjust to anxieties, especially to those involving cruel 'authoritarians.'"

"They try to construct a design–a pattern to master their environment–but it becomes an inflexible measure which eventually destroys the self " (Malin 58). Accordingly, Jesse consciously designs his strategies to cope with his living environment. Unfortunately, what he obtains under such despairing situations are not the real solutions but some workarounds which may exert negative impacts upon the formation of his personality. During the time he stays with his grandfather, he has learned to take silence as a strategy for the sake of getting a shelter. In the face of Dr Pedersen's control, Jesse appears to obey what has been imposed on him without hesitation in order to stay in the care of the family.

To depict Jesse's servile submission, Oates presents some noticeable petty scenes transpiring in the Pedersen's Household. For example, no one is allowed to touch a book entitled *The Book of Fate* kept in the study except for Dr Pedersen himself. The book contains a special section captioned "Impersonal Fates" consisting of clippings from newspapers and magazines, and the content is about strangers, and the destinies of strangers. All these clippings are related to the tragedies and mysterious disappearances of some anonymous individuals, and the acts of violence conducted by some people in the society. Jesse is not frightened by the outrageous depictions. Conversely, these things reinforce his feelings of trust and dependence on Dr Pedersen, and meanwhile they strengthen his sense of rejection of his past, for he painfully notes that he himself has been one of those in this so-called "impersonal fate" (Oates 147).

One day, Jesse happens to catch sight of a familiar clipping before Dr Pedersen closes the book. If the clipping has nothing to do with him, Jesse should have ignored it with a passing glance, but its striking headline as "Boy eludes gun-toting father" arrests his eyes and makes him realize that it is about him. However, he consciously rejects the fact instinctively in order to remain in his present state. Therefore, he deliberately designs a defence strategy to protect him from being hurt by his returned past, and a message immediately comes to his mind as "No, that headline has nothing to do with him" (Oates 148). What's

more, when he accidentally meets his cousin Fritz on the street who has enlisted as a private for World War II, suddenly Jesse is struck by some weird feelings like shame, fear, and the like. He seems to hear Dr. Pedersen whispered in his head, "Let him go, abandon your cousin, don't allow him to recognize you on the street after this …." To echo this hallucination, Jesse thinks to himself, "If he dies in the Navy there will be one less person to know me the way I used to be" (Oates 133). Thereby, Jesse voluntarily represses his self-awareness and gives up a chance to restore his connections with his past. In this way, Dr Pedersen can forge Jesse according to his principles, turning Jesse into his alter ego.

In the Pedersen's household, another interesting scene is the dinnertime quiz-programme, a catechism. When he is asked to answer the father's perennial question related to the term homeostasis, Jesse dutifully recites a paragraph from Walter Cannon's book *The Wisdom of the Body*:

> The living being is stable. It must be so in order not to be destroyed, dissolved, or disintegrated by the colossal forces, often adverse, which surround it. By an apparent contradiction it maintains its stability only if it is excitable and capable of modifying itself according to external stimuli and adjusting its response to the stimulation. It is stable because it is modifiable–the slight instability is the necessary condition for the true stability of the organism. (Oates 134)

It thus follows that equilibrium and modifiability are the two decisive factors maintaining the homeostasis. But these factors are obviously absent from Dr Pedersen's ideology, for Dr Pedersen and his family show a radical imbalance between themselves and the world, which leads to the grotesque aggrandizement of the self and the exaltation of deformity. Although Jesse can memorize the definition of homeostasis, he is not able to reach the state of homeostasis. His willingness to be involved in the Pedersen's household prevents him from obtaining the so-called homeostasis. While he tends to reject his past and abandon it as a part of himself, Jesse has violated the principles of homeostasis. Under such circumstances, his present existence breaks up with his past and thus exists out of the normal continuation of time.

However, Oates does not let her protagonist capitulate completely to the imperatives of Dr. Pedersen's philosophy. An unconscious mercy pulls Jesse out of Dr Pedersen's destructive influences. In spite of his lack of rebelliousness and his servile attempt to please Dr Pedersen, there is something mysterious in

Jesse that makes him unconsciously respond to the other people's predicaments. Specifically, Mrs. Pedersen who treats Jesse with motherly care seems to collapse spiritually under the control of her husband. Mrs. Pedersen asks Jesse to assist her to escape from the family. At this time, her love to him arouses a kind of compassion in Jesse, causing him decisively to give the assistance. His betrayal is undoubtedly unforgiven by Dr Pedersen. Subsequently, Jesse is repelled from the Pedersen's household immediately, as revealed in Dr Pedersen's letter to him,

> Jesse … I pronounce you dead to me. you have no existence. You are nothing. You have betrayed the Pedersen family, which accepted and loved you as a son, and now you are eradicated by the family. Never try to contact us again. You are dead. You do not exist." (Oates 214)

Obviously, Dr Pedersen desires to keep Jesse under his control, attempting to turn the latter into his alter ego. When the control is broken down, Dr Pedersen relentlessly excludes Jesse from his world, retaining absolute authority within his tightly circumscribed and personally ordained system. Thus, Jesse restores to the status of the so-called "impersonal fate." In fact, it is Jesse's mercy that saves him from a meaningless and destructive life, for the incident helps Jesse escape the rapacious egocentricity of Dr Pedersen.

Oates depicts Jesse's fear of losing family's protection in a cartoon-like exaggeration. As Jesse's predicament becomes more embarrassing, the episode becomes more and more exaggerated. Before reading Dr Pedersen's message, which announces his death, Jesse goes into a fast-food restaurant to stem "Tears of hunger dimmed his vision." Oates uses such an exaggerated way to present the episode that Jesse suffers extreme hunger, "He was so hunger; he felt sick with hunger … that there was a shrill hunger in him that rose like a scream … Eating. Pressing the food into his mouth. He had to hurry, he felt so shaky" (Oates 213). Jesse's hunger can be interpreted as an externalization of his loss. He hungers for the nourishment of the family in which he becomes orphaned for the second time – once at the age of fourteen and now at the age of seventeen. That Jesse desperately gobbles up food is apparently an external manifestation of the loss.

Jesse, as expelled from the Pedersen's household, once again falls into the predicament of identity crisis. In order to survive and restore his identity, Jesse

begins a new personal odyssey searching for protection and attempting to achieve his self-fulfilment.

Dr Cady: An Empiricist's Influence on Jesse

When the new chapter unfolds the episode of Jesse's life again, he has become a student of medical science at the University of Michigan. The episode in Book Two is entitled "The finite passing of an infinite passion," which indicates Jesse's new transformation in life. In this part, Jesse resumes the identity of Jesse Vogel, but retains a sense of irreparable damage to himself. During this time, Jesse feels extremely sad whenever recalling his past experience and contemplating on his present situation, "When he began to think of himself, to contemplate himself, his entire body reacted as if in sudden panic – there were things he must not think, must not contemplate, must not remember" (Oates 216). In fact, Jesse's tragedy lies in the fact that he tries to avoid contemplation, to escape memory. He is constantly disturbed by the idea of rejecting his own past. Although Jesse tries to block the Pedersen's episode in his memory, just as he does with his childhood trauma, it is an undeniable fact that he is inevitably shaped by these experiences. Jesse retains many habits developed in the Pedersen's household, as well as some of his eccentricities, for instance, his decisive denial of his own past, the work ethics he follows, his faith in medical practices, etc. Apparently, he has taken in the principles he has learned from his fathers and uses them to guide his life-long journey.

In the meantime, he continues to search for another surrogate father. Jesse's next father surrogate is Dr Benjamin Cady. Dr Cady, undoubtedly, is an irreplaceable figure in Jesse's medical studies. He is the first one amongst Jesse's several father figures who instructs Jesse to use the power of pure science for the purpose of control. Dr Cady is an empiricist who takes empiricism as the ultimate philosophy and psychology in life. He compares the human body to a machine, and emphasizes on the machine-like perfection of the human body. He depicts the human organism as an extraordinarily well-functioning machine which cannot understand its relationship to the world outside of the senses. He believes in humans' senses which, according to Dr Cady are the only channels that connect humans with reality. In his lectures, Dr Cady poses questions related to human isolation, self-enclosure, dissociation and some relevant topics. He says,

> The world is our construction, peopled by us; it is a mystery. All we know of the world, even our most precise laboratory findings, rests

on the perception of the senses, but this very knowledge cannot reveal the relations of the senses to the outside world." (Oates 224)

Jesse is inspired by Dr Cady's statement, and by which the world becomes a small space for one to control readily, while the rest is irrelevant and distracting. Jesse absorbs these words and thus obtains a sense of safety brought by the mechanistic control in him. Under the influence of Dr Cady's philosophy, Jesse feels his body becomes mechanical and his spirit becomes automated. Seemingly, Jesse indulges in the safety that Dr Cady helps create for him. In so doing, he seems to have got the solutions to all problems in science as well as all his puzzles in life. Now Jesse firmly believes that to replace the self for the world is a means to become invulnerable to the sense of loss and defeat. As a result, Jesse obstructs all worrying memories of his past and severs all his connections with other people, for "Time was mobbed with people. How could he establish himself, construct himself, in such a mob …?" (Oates 225).

Through pure science, Jesse seems to get everything under control. Actually, he knows that he does not completely master his willed self because in some parts of his brain he senses that "other Jesses existed, sinister and unkillable; and he accepted them, he could not rid himself of them" (Oates 220). Obviously, Jesse unconsciously falls into the situation of self-division in this stage of his life. There is an unconscious sinister self in him which appears to torture him frequently. He is deeply disturbed by this psychological trance. In the process of his struggle to restore his normal state, Jesse tries to bring back that connectedness between himself and the outside world. Later, he is seen to have frequent engagements with a pretty nurse named Anne-Marie, but he breaks up with her soon and then turns his attention to Helene Cady, primarily because she is Dr Cady's daughter. Eventually he chooses to get married with Helene who is rendered as an oddly passive, intellectual woman. Through the marriage, Jesse seems to become more skillful in controlling his life, influenced now by Dr Cady.

Jesse's marriage is a mirror which can reflect his self-concept in this stage of his life. It demonstrates the ways in which society disturbs the self. The Romantic idea of the self suggests that society plays a decisive role in shaping the self at the stage of adult life.

As a social animal, man cannot live without human society. When in society, man is driven by material needs and meanwhile has to act in accordance with social rules and customs. As part of the society, the self in it bears stigmas of the

society. Jesse is a good example to demonstrate the Romantic idea of the self. Jesse has been an orphan from the moment he loses his family and appears without an identity. He is the one of those at the bottom of the society. By the time he is going to marry, Jesse has been molded by many disconnected influences. He becomes more and more subject to social needs. He intends to cling to someone who is in possession of power and lofty social status, because these people can help him achieve success, prestige, or recognition in any form. In this point, Horney contends that

> A strong need to exploit others, to outsmart them, to make them of use to himself, is part of the picture. Any situation or relationship is looked at from the standpoint of 'What can I get out of it?'– whether it has to do with money, prestige, contacts, or ideas. (52)

Before marrying Helene, Jesse has been engaged with Anne to whom Jesse has a strong attachment. But when he realizes that Anne is just a girl from an ordinary social background, he will be unable to help Jesse enhance his social status. Given that situation, he abandons Anne unhesitatingly and decisively diverts his love to Helene. For Jesse who desires to climb up to the upper class of society, love always plays a negligible role in his life. What is of prime concern is to have a mate who is eminently desirable, through whose attractiveness, social prestige, or wealth he can enhance his own position. Jesse intends to use marriage as an instrument to guarantee a comfortable life and heighten his social status. Material comfort and social status are taken as the dominant factors in Jesse's decision to marry Helene. As a result, the marriage finally turns out to be unfulfilling. Jesse cannot find his true self in the marriage. And this has pushed Jesse to more severe inner conflicts.

With the marriage, Jesse seems to have confirmed his identity with the control within himself and the support of his controllable life-long family by now. However, in his work his sense of perfection often disturbs him and makes him feel extremely unsatisfied. He does not allow his patients to die in his hands, because it challenges his sense of control and ruins his sense of perfection. Jesse seeks to quell this phantasmagoria reality by deploying pure knowledge and pure science, and continues to deny his own past, because "it helped to dispel his own thoughts, his memories, the problems of his being. *Control*. That was all he wanted" (Oates 224). Similarly, Jesse adopts a wholly impersonal approach in his professional medical practice, as he reveals:

> I don't especially want to be Dr. Vogel, *Dr. Vogel*, I don't want

> people grateful to me. I'd like to be a presence that is invisible, impersonal. I don't want any personality involved – where there's personality everything is confused. (Oates 240)

Jesse, therefore, makes another tragic mistake, that is both his marriage and his career in this stage of his life stand for an attempted escape from the "sinister and unkillable" (Oates 220) nature of his personality, including the dark memories of his painful, turbulent past. In this case, he needs a more powerful sense of control to alleviate this pressure and to make his identity stable.

However, it is true that Jesse's final father surrogate increasingly strengthens his belief in the power of pure science to give his discontinuous life some order and meaning.

Reva Denk: A Sensualist's Influence on Jesse

When Jesse once again falls into an isolated situation, there comes Oates's constant symbol of the frightening yet often retrievable unpredictability of life, namely sexual love. Reva Denk, with a sensual blonde beauty and in marked contrast to Jesse's intelligent, melancholy wife Helene, arouses Jesse's long-repressed passion. She reminds him of his past, especially his mother, for Reva bears a striking resemblance to his mother. Moreover, Reva also mysteriously brings back the sensuality of femaleness, a feeling that Jesse has tried to repress since boyhood. As a boy, in the school lavatory, he often unconsciously glimpses at the drawing of a woman which is used to shape a pubic area making it look like a black door. Jesse's fascination with Reva releases him from depending on science as a means of controlling reality. Significantly, Reva opens up in him an aspect of himself that his principle of technological thoroughness has taught him to neglect–a mysterious abyss in his personality. Jesse is thus involuntarily dragged into a dilemma by the panic of the returned past Reva mysteriously brings back to him and simultaneously indulges in the excitement at the rediscovery of the unpredictable and unfathomable depth of his personality. She strikes him with an image of the wholeness he has never found in his adult life which allows his long-oppressed passion to unleash in his efforts to transcend the limitations of personality and self. Oates depicts Jesse's confusion and loss in his relations with Reva as:

> Jesse wondered why he had lived so much of his life without love. He had never loved anyone…. Why had he wasted so many years of his life? Years of his life? He needed only to take this woman in his

> arms and bury himself in her, in the pit of her belly, in the most secret part of her being, to blot out his consciousness and to rise again inside her, transformed by the moist shadowed labyrinthine secrecy of her brain, resurrected there… (392-393).

In his sexual relationships with Reva, Jesse seems to get a way of liberating himself. But Jesse's infatuation with Reva is somewhat confusing, for except her beauty and sensuality she has nothing to comfort him. Reva Denk, as her first name suggests, represents all dream-thinking which entails the fact of inevitably retreating from reality. In fact, she embodies just another disguise of the self-enclosed ego, which is quite apparent from the demands she sets for accepting Jesse's love–she forces him to swear never to go back to his family, and never to see his wife and daughters again. Obsessed with Reva and feeling the potentiality of liberation through this adulterous relationship, Jesse resolutely set out on a journey to Wisconsin to meet her. Finally, after she promises to come away with him, Jesse prepares for their reunion with a ritualistic cleansing of his body. During the cleansing he stares at his face in the mirror and notes that "it was a curious terrain of slopes and ridges, skin and cartilage and freckles and small veins and hairs, brute dark hairs, pits, bumps, hollows" (Oates 421). The examination leads to a moment of recognition. After that, Jesse decides to abandon his self-indulgence associated with sensuality to fulfill his responsibility for his family and his patients. With the rusty razor blade, he hypno genetically cuts various parts of his body, performing a ritual of purgation, an act that initiates the process that will cleanse him of self-complacency and restore the crevice between Jesse and the world. Jesse finally draws his blade through the tangle of pubic hair, signifying his denies of his own sexual drive. In so doing, he is ready to abandon this attempt to achieve transcendence through sexual love. Bleeding is a symbol of humanity, but before this period Jesse is fond of showing the condition of bloodlessness. With the unfolding of the act of self-mutilation and self-purification, Book Two comes to an end. As the title of this part suggests–the title is "The finite passing of an infinite passion," the infinite passion from which Jesse suffers, the passion that the self can control reality or transcend it, finally submits to the finite passing.

Conclusion

In a 1973 essay entitled "The Myth of the Isolated Artist," Oates states, "All the books published under my name in the past two years have been formalized, complex propositions about the nature of personality and its relationship to a

specific culture (contemporary America)" (Friedman 3). In her fiction, the individual is viewed in the perspective of culture and history. She insists on exploring the dark sides of contemporary American society and presenting its destructive influences upon the individuals living in it. Social and economic factors are pivotal to the welfare of her characters as they try to adapt themselves to the milieu of their times for survival. In responding to the seething, vibrating American society, Oates has created numerous fictional characters who cope with the phantasmagoric landscapes of American life and have to suffer a certain degree of psychological and spiritual disturbance. She presents these sufferings with both scrupulous accuracy and great compassion. In *Wonderland*, Oates presents the predicament of the individuals as the result of pressures from the families as well as the society. She unfolds the American historical vicissitude from the Great Depression to the 1970s in which her characters, disturbed and unhappy, are victims of their social milieu. Oates's delineation of the personal desires and the domestic problems reiterates her concerns over social conflicts and emotional predicament of contemporary America. *Wonderland* is structured as the "the correlation of historical, cultural, religious, philosophical, and psychological in the life story of one character" (Friedman 115). It obviously manifests Oates's attempt to realize what she has called her "laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book" (Clemons 48). She concentrates on Jesse's predicament induced by the strong wave of social, cultural, economic and political transformation. Jesse's search for self-realization is doomed to be futile, because he just lives in an age in which civilization is in its rapid transition, in which highly contradictory values and divergent ways of living exist side by side. In *Wonderland*, with each move of Jesse's journey, the landscape shifts to another era of American history, so that he must confront the challenges posed by the new situations before proceeding forwards. Traversing all these rapidly changing environments and experiences Jesse constantly fights to discover and develop his sense of self, but till the end he still cannot find any alternative of being defined by the externals.

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