

The Projection of Repellent Psychological Horror in Select Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oates

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ABSTRACT: Each human being exists subjectively and experiments to realize the world only through the prism of the self. The mysterious life of human being has led them to experience some uninvited events both externally and internally. This inaccessible experience has been depicted only by a few writers. Among them, Joyce Carol Oates reigns supreme in the portrayal of horror. This study analyses the portrayal of psychological horror in Joyce Carol Oates's short stories 'The Premonition' and 'The Temple' from the anthology *Haunted: The tales of Grotesque* (1994). It exhibits the nightmarish conditions of the present Southern American culture with all its anxiety, paranoia, dislocation and explosive conflicts. As 'literature should inform as well as enlighten', this research paper explores the grotesque female individual obsessions and their transcendence with the aid of conscious awakening and faith in the self. It unpacks Oates's issue based approach to writing short fiction and its impact in the postmodern world filled with repressed desires, emotional conflicts and fragmented thoughts, which leads them to be the victim of horror. The study concludes with the justification that Joyce Carol Oates with her missionary literary oeuvre has promoted higher humanism and intellectual pantheism.

Keywords: Horror, fear, Psychology Repellent Psychological Horror

I. INTRODUCTION

Horrorifying horror

Horror, by nature, is a personal touch- an intrusion into the comfort levels. Robert McCammon, one of the founders of Horror Writers Association (HWA) quotes, "Horror fiction upsets apple carts, burns old buildings, and stampedes the horses. Horror story can be a guide through a nightmarish world, entered freely and by the reader's own will. The nightmare ride can shock, educate, illuminate, threaten, shriek, and whisper before it lets the readers loose." (qtd. in. Twilight Zone Magazine n.pag)

Horror focuses on people or events that could feasibly take place in reality. The story tends to be fairly gruesome, involving murder, mutilation, ritual sacrifice, or other horrific situations that can harm or kill a human being. Stories such as these often focus on unstable antagonists who have a penchant for murder or torture. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary renders the primary definition of horror as, "a painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay" (689). The definition supports that a horror story is one which elicits the dreadful emotions in the reader. Horror short fiction is a category of writing in which a story is crafted to horrify the reader.

Horror focuses on the emotions and thoughts that make people scared or uncomfortable. In many cases, the stories revolve around hopelessness and bleakness from which the protagonist cannot escape. Further it is about abnormal occurrences encountered by normal people, wherein they ultimately become powerless to prevent. Before analyzing the different kinds of horror, it is evident that like any other genre, horror also has many sub and cross genres - Gothic, Apocalyptic, Paranormal, Psychological, Splatter, Punk, Sci-fi, Fantasy and gonzo. Douglas Winter has firmly advocated in his anthology 'Prime Evil' (1982) that "Horror is not a genre, like the mystery or science fiction. Horror is an emotion" (n pag.)

Though there are different kinds of opinion about whether horror has sub and cross genres or not, it is certain that it has its vastness. Horror is commonly divided into many categories, such as Supernatural, Psychological, Allegorical, Sociological, Exploitation horror and so on. More than the description of the social, supernatural and environment, it is high time to present the problem that creates the fear in the reader. Of the many emotions which get identified in the horror fiction, the most prominent one is the human fear which is interconnected with psychology. The fear of losing one's self, the loss of personal identity though an insane behaviour or a transformation into an alien one transforms the victims into grotesque or horrific images with the psychological effect. At times it allows the victims to dwell in a fear of death and in a fear of the unknown.

The present paper analyses the short stories 'The Premonition' and 'The Temple' of Joyce Carol Oates published in her anthology entitled: 'Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque' (1994). The two short stories selected from the anthology have been employed to classify and justify the Psychological Horror.

Psychological Horror relies on the characters' fear and emotional instability to build stress and tense. It aims to create discomfort by exposing the psychological vulnerability and fear. Oates through her short stories creates the female character to be emotionally unstable owing to their fears, beliefs and guilt, thereby creating a psychological horror in the psyche of the readers. To evidence the same, the short stories 'The Premonition' and 'The Temple' have been taken for detailed examination.

The short story entitled, 'The Premonition' is a tale narrated by Whitney Paxton, the brother of an alcoholic bully-Quinn. Quinn has been abusing his wife and daughters. Whitney had a premonition as his brother has injured his wife Ellen, even his daughters Molly and Trish. He decided to travel to his brother, Quinn's house. Though Quinn hailed from the prestigious Paxton family, he remained a drunkard, but Quinn had moved his family to Whitewater Heights. Usually all the members in a prestigious family maintained a conventional mode of living together. To the contrary, it remained mysterious, why Quinn separated himself from the ancient heritage and moved to live as a nuclear family.

After reaching Quinn's home, Whitney rang the doorbell and waited for a long time but no one turned up. Though the Christmas was approaching near, he found no decoration in the house. The house was so dark, which arose a kind of fear in him. He rang the doorbell again, he called out cautiously, "Hello, Isn't anybody home?" (174). He thought whether the family had gone on a trip before Christmas.

Whitney had another premonition too, as the women would have been killed and Quinn appeared with "this blood-smeared chef's apron" (177). The earlier incident made him to think so. Once Whitney came late to a party, Quinn approached him in a fearful manner by holding a knife and fork in his hand. Whitney thought of other premonition in which a middle-aged insurance executive had been shot by his wife and children. He wanted to get rid of these entire premonitions.

With all these premonitions of rumour and suspicion leading to some horror, Whitney rang up the door bell continuously. Whitney thought of going to the back of the home but, two years ago, Whitney was accused of conspiring with Ellen behind his back that proceeded to a short-lived divorce. Quinn said to Whitney, "Tell the truth, Whit! I can take it! I won't hurt her, or you! Just tell the truth, you cowardly son of a bitch!", but "Ellen had never loved anyone but Quinn, the man was her life" (176). Since this event the Paxton brothers' relationship was strained. They were supposed to meet each other on occasions like Christmas Day at the Paxton family's house.

Whitney thought of going from the back door of the house at the same time, he was frightened of his brother that his presence in a drunken state would take him to the extreme levels of conflicts. So he abandoned the thought. At last, after a long wait, Whitney was received by Ellen, with a kind of surprise. Whitney said, "Ellen, I'm sorry to disturb you, but – you haven't been answering your phone, and I was worried about you" (177). Ellen's nightmarish appearances further confirmed his fear. She appeared with her eyes wide and moist and the pupils appeared dilated; there was a look of fatigue in her face, yet something feverish, virtually festive, as well. She seemed astonished to see her brother-in-law, gripping his hand hard, swaying slightly. Whitney wondered if she'd been drinking.

The exaggeration of her eyes and her panic effect creates a psychological impact in the readers' minds. The hysterical behaviour of the daughters and mother creates a distinctly female horror all around when "Ellen was hurriedly removing her stained apron" (181) and "Trish removed her stained rubber gloves and tossed them onto a counter" (182). The premonition conceived in Whitney's psyche has been the result of a state of repression wherein consciousness arises later which Sigmund Freud defines it as, "The state in which the ideas existed before being made conscious is called by us repression, and we asserted that the force which instituted the repression and maintain it is perceived as resistance during the work of analysis." (n. pag.)

When Whitney arrived at the house on that night before Christmas, he realized that the female members were normal in their behaviour. It was Quinn's absence that created a suspicion in him that he could have been murdered. Ellen smiled at him sarcastically and he was made fun of even by her daughters Molly and Trish. Whitney's suspicion grew further by seeing the appearance of Ellen, as she was wearing stained slacks, a smock, an apron, no makeup, lipstick. She would probably take much care on her charming and beautiful appearance and clothes.

She asked him in a high-pitched voice, the reason for his worried countenance of Ellen and her daughters. The news of the drunkenness of his brother had further increased his worry. When he questioned about Quinn she said that he was on a business call and asked them to come to Paris or Rome. Whitney was taken to meet Molly and Trish, whom he met after six months. They too greeted him, cried in unison and

giggled. While Ellen was talking to Whitney, she 'was hurriedly removing her stained apron' (181). Whitney observed a grotesque atmosphere in the room and thought, with an undercurrent of hysteria. A radio was tuned to a popular music station, and from it issued the simplistic, percussive, relentlessly shrill music young Americans loved, though Whitney could not see how Ellen tolerated it. . . . The very air was overheated, as if steamy. Scattered about were empty cans of Diet Coke and crusts of pizza; on the counter near a stack of gift-wrapped packages was a bottle of California red wine. (181)

When Whitney was offered a cup of coffee, he apologetically asked whether he gave too much trouble. Ellen replied sarcastically, "Of course not! Of course not! Nothing is too much trouble now!" (182). Whitney was thinking of the betrayal of Quinn to his wife and daughters. Each one mentioned a direction and a reason as Quinn had gone on business call. While talking to Whitney, "Trish removed her stained rubber gloves and tossed them onto a counter" (182). This strange behaviour induces him to have fear over the absence of Quinn. He recalled a past event in which Ellen's head was slapped by her husband who further added, "Bees! Goddam bees! Trying to sting poor Ellen" (183). Oates in 'Premonition' presents the grotesque caricature of a suburban husband and father, often in his state of drunkenness Quinn over-exacts himself as a forceful hyper-masculine figure. The over consumption of the drink serves as an aid to the growing aspects of the physical grotesque. His threats of physical aggression suggest Quinn to be moving towards a masculine ideal with dominance and violence.

Whitney witnessed so many presents being wrapped and some unwrapped in and around the space. Though housekeeping is the performance of the expected gender role, the overzealousness execution of the work creates a grotesque horror. The feminine role of domesticity with its house cleaning ability does not exhibit the feminine role but proves to be the concealment of gruesome murder.

Whitney was given a Christmas gift by bearing the line, "To Uncle Whitney with love-Ellen, Molly, Trish" (186), the Quinns with the conditions that the gift should not be opened until Christmas. Whitney was too eager to quit. Whitney found Quinn's name missing. Then he felt the satisfaction that 'Ellen had taken revenge of sorts upon her selfish husband, however petty and to inconsequential a revenge' (186). The absence of the name indicated the purposeful negligence of the wife towards her husband Quinn.

Quinn's absence both physically and in the wrapped gift created a suspicion in him that he could have been murdered. Bearing his carefully wrapped Christmas gift, Whitney recollects the supernatural grotesque scenes which he had encountered in his brother's house. These suspicions force him to admit that the truth of the murder of his brother was quite obvious.

The artistic orderliness and fixed expression of the woman and her daughter does not seem to counter balance the situation. It is through Whitney, the readers witness the terrifying and satanic atmosphere. The atmosphere proves that the grotesque may also reside in situations. The orderly atmosphere creates suspicion in the minds of Whitney which he sense to be not fair but foul. The contraction parallels the premonition created by the three witches in William Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' who utter,

First Witch: I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch: Paddock calls.

Third Witch: Anon.

All: Fair is foul, and foul is fair!

Hover through the fog and filthy air. (I 1. 9-13)

The short story 'The Premonition' reveals the fear and suspicion that Whitney encountered in Quinn's home, which exists as root cause the emergence of psychological horrifying impact.

The short story entitled, 'The Temple' rigidly expresses the Unnamed Woman's experience of the mysterious sound is heard at the bottom of the garden. And she traces the skull and bones of a child in the garden. Then she treasured it in a bedroom, which she considered as a Secret Temple. The Temple opens with the mysterious sound heard by a woman. At first, she believed the sound to be coming from inside the house. She thought it to be a small animal like squirrel trapped in the attic beneath the caves. The scratching sound came from the old garden which resembled a baby's cry and it caused much pain.

Next morning, there was an unexpected bright sunshine which paved her way into the neglected Garden. She made up her mind to find the mysterious sound and prepared herself with,

The mewing sound, the scratching – it seemed to be issuing from the very bottom of the garden, close by a stained concrete drainage ditch that marked the end of the property. As soon as she listened for it, however, it ceases. Out of the old garage, that had once been a stable, the woman got a shovel, a spade, a rake, these implements festooned in cobwebs and dust, and began to dig. (314) She removed the sinewy weeds, vines, chicory, wild mustard, tall grasses in the area from which the cry had emanated. She found it easy to dig the soil as it was wet with moisture. Almost, beneath her feet, the mewing sound was heard. She grunted as, "Yes. Yes

.I'm here now" (314). She dug deeper at the place of the crying sound. There, she found an aged brick, two broken pieces of pottery glass and stoner. The Beetles moved hurriedly with short steps and the earthworms squirmed, some of them were cut cruelly into two halves. There, she sensed the quickened heart beat from her ears. At last she finally discovered a human skull. It was too small and resembled a child's skull.

The art of collecting the objects and entities that have already been revealed as body parts, human skulls borne and all manner of filth – all these equate to the strategy of incorporating horrific metonymy in this story, 'The Temple'. The creation of all these parts into a human form has created a component of danger and disturb and this structure of the collected human form has provided the means to develop the attribute of art horror.

The lonely woman's longing for a child might have taken her to the world of insanity wherein she has gone in search of the path of organs of a child creates a human form to the borne and has worshipped as a temple. The short story presents a claustrophobic sense of being trapped in a sense of space traversed by madness, terror and desire. The Oates' horror portrays the horrifying effect dramatically. The description of the skull and bones are depicted to instill the element of horror.

She questioned "was it a child's skull?"

Why it was buried here?" (315). She thought that it was on "her family's property? Unnamed, Unmarked? Unacknowledged? Unknown?" (351). She discovered a number of scattered bones, slender forearm, curving ribs, parts of a hand and fingers. She thought of how the small fingers had been scratched by someone.

Finally, she covered with the antique velvet cloth to carry the skull and bones to her backside of the bedroom. Then she uttered, "I am here, I will always be here" and also the woman promised, "I will never abandon you" (315). Then, she carefully arranged the skull and bones into the shape of a human being. Though most of the bones were missing, it missed the woman's loving eye. The bedroom being converted into a "secret temple" (316), though reflects the relationship between the mother and an unknown child provokes horrifying thoughts in the minds of the readers for the mystery remains the same till the end. The insane mind owing to the sterility in her min and her body creates a sense of awe in the readers when she collects the bones and converts it into a human form. Woman without children behave abnormally which cannot be predicted yet remains a reality in many who years from a motherly bond either in a doll or object or bones tied together as in The Sacred Temple.

The abnormal psyche which leads to the orderly murder by the estranged wife in 'The Premonition', and the creation of the secret temple by the womb in 'Temple' all these create a psychological horror in the minds of the readers. The uncanny events which have topped off the above mentioned stories had caused a sense of uneasiness and awe. There has been a momentary anxiety and an emotional upheaval. These psychological horrifying events have moved the readers rhetorically to the ultimate truth that unawowed, unknown, concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe, which shall remain to be mysterious forever.

The major stories for presenting the art-horror are fusion, fission, magnification, and horrific metonymy. The horrific metonymy in 'The Temple' has all aided Joyce Carol Oates' short stories to promote art horror amidst the reader.

II. CONCLUSION

Throughout the twentieth century the pendulum continues to swing between the conflicts of nature and nurture, a more important factor in determining human aggression. At the turn of the millennium a shift from this assumption to a more balanced perspective was prevalent, in which both nature and nurture were considered essential in understanding the causes of individual aggressive and violent behaviour. The present human society is found to be a society in which men and women are incomplete and fragmented. Family, the foundation of a society, is a place where every individual usually look for love and fulfillment. The American south is a community, which possesses a cultural heritage of its own. With Oates's exhaustive psychic experience, she has depicted the idiocies of the contemporary American scenes through her haunting tales of ordinary people whose lives have been filled with horrifying.

The obsessions, distortions, dislocations, familial misunderstandings loneliness leading to isolations have led both men and women to enter into the world of psychological depression leading to horrifying visions. The psychological agony leading the women to indulge in murdering the husband in 'The Premonition' and yet hiding the fact, owing to the fear of the society and the woman's sterility leading her horrifying psychic act of arranging the child's dead organs into a human form and worshipping it in a hidden place in 'The Temple', have been portrayed to assert the varied psychological syndromes which the women are subject to.

As Oates suggests in her 'New Heaven and Earth', that we are experiencing, "a simple evolution into a higher humanism, perhaps a kind of 'intelligent pantheism,' in which all substance in the universe including the substance fortunate enough to perceive it is there by equal right" (51-52), there exists an intelligent

pantheism even in her depiction of the grotesque behavioral patterns in female characters like Ellen in 'The Premonition'

Joyce Carol Oates has an uncanny ability to give a kaleidoscopic vision of America. Oates absorbs and transmits in her writings the terror which is often a part of living in America. She is more explicit to social turmoil and the frightening American life. She has an instinct for the exploding social menace in Detroit. She presents the sheer rich chaos of American life. Her characters are deflated when they have unattainable needs and try to escape the world in which they are born. Through their defeat, Oates stresses the fact that the world into which they are born must be accepted and respected. The reason for the tragic destruction of her characters is their own lack of self-identity and self-fulfillment. The isolated self is connected with violence, retreat, defensiveness and brittleness.

She explores two major fears. One is the individual's fear of physical or emotional which another person might inflict on him and the second is man's secret fear of the consequences of a sudden eruption of the force which lie within him which he cannot understand or control. It is here in this aspect Oates parallels William Shakespeare who transcends all ages through his writings which he depicts in the destiny of mankind in, 'King Lear' as,

I' th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw,
Which made me think a man a worm. . . .
As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods
They kill us for their sport. (IV.1 32-37)

Her works evoke an overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life. Her select short fictions reflect the demolition of centuries of traditional cultural foundation. As Harpham asserts, "It is this capacity that insures a text's continued life by guaranteeing that there is something left to discover. One sign of this 'something left' is contradiction or dissonance" (231). For a convenient critical examination of the grotesque the acts of horror, obsessed love and the traits of violence have been dealt exclusively, yet as Mary Russo foregrounds the grotesque to poses interdependence, one trait overlaps the other which provides a room for chance within the very constrained spaces of normalization.

Joyce Carol Oates's works has received universal acknowledgement and has been significantly noted for the insistence that man's life will lose its meaning and significance if it is does not focus on the foundations of faith and religion. Her far reaching success lies in her exhibition of reality and in the blending of the religious faith with literary aesthetics. It is evident from this study that Joyce Carol Oates's short fiction has proved to be distinct from entertainers and propagandists. Joyce Carol Oates as a messiah has dedicated her life to document the lived experience of the members of the Southern American society.

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