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Ambivalent Discourses - A Gender-Oriented Close Reading of Joyce Carol Oates'

### "The Premonition"

#### 1. Introduction

Writing in a post-modern, post-colonial world is oftentimes connected with hybridity: Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie, for example, are crossing frontiers of genres in their works; a similar statement can be made about reading. Theories and ideologies overlap, allowing for new perspectives on literature. In the case of the following paper, it is Joyce Carol Oates' short story "The Premonition" which is put under the microscope of the theoretical framework of post-colonial and gender studies - an approach that is particularly fruitful for readings of Western literature by female writers. Before undertaking an in-depth analysis of Oates' short story, I am going to outline the theoretical framework in question in detail. I shall argue that the conflicting and even contradictory readings of the text are strongly connected to gender and especially the way it is codified in Oates' culture; the uncertainty of Ellen's husband's death and the condition of silence that surrounds the events preceding Whitney's arrival at his brother's house deliver insight into the correlation between gender, language and power.

#### 2. Gender in Theory

Post-colonial theorists emphasize the importance of language: "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and reality become established" (Ashcroft 7). These conceptions, furthermore, are defined as relative terms, as binary oppositions truth/lie, order/disorder, reality/fiction. According to Derrida's theory, thinking in terms of binary oppositions is characteristic of Western culture: "Something is white but not black, masculine and therefore not feminine, a cause rather than an effect ... presence [as opposed to] absence" (Murfin, Ray 92). What is particularly relevant for

structures of dominance is that “these dichotomies are not simply oppositions but also hierarchies in miniature, containing one term that Western culture views as positive or superior and another considered negative or inferior” (92).

Thinking in hierarchies produces what post-colonial critics term the Other. Ashcroft points out that Otherness is constructed “in such a way that it always contains a trace of ambivalence or anxiety about its own authority. In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it” (101-2). Since the Other “can ... only be constructed out of the archive of 'the self',” it only comes into being “by a continual process of what Bhabha calls 'repetition and displacement' and this instigates an ambivalence at the very site of imperial authority and control” (101-2). In other words, the Other is a projected identity that denies the othered subject the power of creating an identity for him/herself. In order for the power of the privileged center to be maintained, the Other is inevitably pushed to the margins (102).

This situation of Otherness tellingly illustrates the position of women within patriarchal definitions of gender: “Gender is a system of power in that it privileges some men and disadvantages most women” (Davis, Evans, Lorber 2) Gender, however, is a construct that is by no means limited to its patriarchal definition: “Gender should not be approached as an immutable, irreducible fact of nature. Instead, it should be approached as a construction; more exactly, it is a never-ending process of constructing ideas about male and female characteristics and differences” (Schafer 1). Within the context of patriarchy, women are constructed in relation to men in a highly restrictive way:

[B]eing female absolutely requires heterosexuality and childbearing in the context of a traditional nuclear family. ... As creatures of nature, females are simpler, more emotive or “hysterical”... [M]en are located higher in the order of things. They are beings who have emerged from nature to occupy a stable, complex, godlike position at the center of power, reason, language, and ordered change. They are plainly visible, whereas women are hidden in mystery or behind artifice. That's why male comes first in the verbal coupling; women, being less definable, are what's left over. (2-3)

Thus, women are associated with the primitive/disorder/emotion; their othering resembles the othering of colonized cultures as described above.

Consequently, Joyce Carol Oates, being a woman, writes from a marginal position. According to Ashcroft, “[a] characteristic of dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion” (32). Patriarchal values which are embedded in the concept of the family are indeed subverted in the story. The gloomy picture that Oates paints of a pre-Christmas family meeting stands in sharp contrast to stereotypical depictions of the heterosexual family as a source of love and support featuring the man as the head and bread-earner, the woman as mother and housewife, and happy children.

### 3. Gender in “The Premonition”

#### 3.1. A Family Portrait

First of all, the focalizer of the story is Whitney, Quinn's younger brother. The events are filtered through his point of view. As we shall see, what he sees as well as what he omits is equally important for my reading of the story. My point of departure is the depiction of characters from Whitney's memory - that is a portrayal of the relationship of Ellen and Quinn, their family life before Whitney's visit. These memories offer a snapshot of an abusive relationship, nevertheless tolerated within patriarchal context. The observations during Whitney's visit deserve a separate section.

##### 3.1.1. Quinn as the Bread-Earner

The bread-earner in Oates' story is Quinn. He is characterized in a thoroughly masculine way as a man of “wealth and local prominence,” “a big man,” “a physical person” in terms of strength and power: “he used his hands to express himself, and sometimes those hands hurt” (Oates 173). His position of patriarchal authority is underlined by the word “everybody” in the section concerning his AA membership. For a man like Quinn it is “more difficult, everyone agreed ... to join AA, to admit he had a drinking problem; to admit he had a problem with his temper” (172). In Quinn's case, power is associated with tyranny. His brother, Whitney, from whose perspective the story is narrated, shows relief as Ellen drops her divorce proceedings, “because Quinn, his family restored to him, his authority confirmed, would be placated. He'd no further reason to be angry with his younger brother” (176). Thus, the institution of family signifies patriarchal authority in the

first place. Ellen's attempt at divorce is considered as destabilizing the hierarchy of masculine center/head/husband and feminine margins/servant/wife.

### 3.1.2. Ellen as Quinn's Wife and his Children's Mother

As defined by her husband, "Quinn Paxton's wife," Ellen is associated with feminine powerlessness: her divorce proceedings are "short-lived" (176). As the silenced Other, Ellen lacks the power of speech in Quinn's presence and is rendered invisible: at a family gathering, Quinn "had suddenly and seemingly without provocation slapped his young wife's head ... so swiftly few of the guests had noticed. Red-faced, incensed, Quinn said loudly, for the benefit of witnesses, "Bees!... Trying to sting poor Ellen!" ... No one followed [Ellen]. No one spoke" (183). It is Quinn's point of view that is presented to the witnesses. He justifies his actions from a position of absolute power. Ellen's actions, her possible rebellion against Quinn's patriarchal control that is replaced by "seemingly without provocation" are absent from the discourse. Ellen is reduced to her body: in public, she is "unfailingly glamorous - a quiet, reserved, beautiful woman who took obsessive care with grooming and clothes, and whose very speech patterns seemed premeditated" (178). The characterization of her speech patterns suggests control over her language by Quinn and his male-dominated society. Thus, if Ellen ever speaks in Quinn's presence, she is pushed into a prescribed role. Ellen's preoccupation with her physical appearance is concordant with the social standards for women in patriarchal cultures as described by Anleu: "The social norms ... governing women's bodies, behaviour, and appearance are far more restrictive and repressive than those regulating men's bodies. They tend to reinforce women's lower social status and emphasize women's association with the body and appearance rather than the mind and rational thought" (359). Quinn's control over his wife ranges from her speech to her shoes: "Quinn liked women in high heels - good-looking women ... Ellen rarely appeared in anything other than stylishly high heels, even at casual gatherings" (Oates 178). High heels signify passivity, immobility and the importance of being decorative for women. Having children, Ellen qualifies as a good wife. Her motherhood confirms her femininity.

Interestingly, Trish and Molly are given less characterization than their mother. They are summarized as "Ellen, even his [Quinn's] daughters," "Ellen and the girls," "his brother's household," and, during the visit, "his brother Quinn's family"

(173, 175, 176, 185). Thus, they are seen as the extension of their mother and do not possess own identities.

### 3.2. The Premonition versus the Reason: Ambivalent Discourses, a Question of Interpretation

The opening paragraph of the short story introduces the significant motif of premonition. A premonition does not equal knowledge and is thus situated outside the realm of truth. In terms of binary oppositions, premonition, associated with superstition from Whitney's masculine point of view, is codified as feminine. A "superstitious man" is an ambivalent phrase (172). In order to maintain control over his masculine identity and avoid hybridization with the feminine Other, Whitney immediately negates the statement: "Not that Whitney was a superstitious man. He wasn't" (172). This ambivalence foreshadows the course of events during Whitney's visit. The crucial aspect is Quinn's absence. It is this absence and the strange, even uncanny details that surround it, that Whitney's discourse tries to make sense of and deliver a *reasonable* explanation for. This attempt stems from the anxiety of the center as described by Bhabha: "Anxiety about ambivalence stems from a deep-seated contradiction in the process by which the Other is constructed, a basis of fundamental contradiction which opens colonial discourse to the possibility of fracture from within" (qtd in Ashcroft 101). Thus, in order to preserve patriarchal power, Whitney has to deny any interpretation that offers a possibility of Ellen's empowerment, of her reclaiming a central position and establishing a matriarchy with her daughters.

Whitney's subconscious frames the visit with two antithetic images. The first image, which precedes his visit, is triggered by a "feeling of unease through the day," the "tinge of fear," and a "further premonition" (173, 175). He fears that "Quinn had done something to Ellen and the girls, in a fit of rage" and envisions him "in his blood-smeared chef's apron," accompanied by the "whirling of the electric gadget, the deadly flash of the blades," "flush-faced," "with the strained ebullience of a man who is on the verge of drunkenness but determined not to lose control," "two hundred pounds, his pale blue eyes prominent in his face, his voice ringing," with "the wicked-looking carving knife" (175). This allusion to possible murder clearly assigns the role of the victim to Ellen and the girls. The antithetic image of a murderous woman that implies the possibility of Ellen having killed her

abusive husband is rather tame: “[T]he cook cleaning chickens, whistling loudly as she worked - ducking the limp carcasses in steaming water, plucking feathers, shopping and tearing off wings, legs, feet, scooping out, by hand, moist, slithery innards” (185). This image is triggered by an actual sensation during the visit in contrast to the nebulous premonition: “There was that peculiar odor - a cloying, slightly rancid odor, as of blood” (185). He supposes that the “blood-heavy odor” comes from menstruation, and, instead of investigating the secret behind this smell, that posits the threat of female empowerment, he decides that “[s]ome secrets are best kept by females, among females” (185).

Whitney's “initial, though confused impression” that there is “something wrong” with Ellen is contributed to by Ellen's “vigorously wringing her hands, ... wiping them, on an apron” and her anxiety about the doorbell (177). Whitney's confusion originates in Ellen's peculiar appearance; there is “a look of fatigue on her face, yet something feverish, virtually festive,” she shuts the door “swiftly, even zestfully” with a “strong-boned, urgent” hand, pushing “gaily through the swinging doors into the kitchen, leading Whitney by the hand, as if in triumph”(177, 178, 180). This depiction suggests power as contrasted to the description in 3.1.2. That there indeed must have been a profound change is emphasized by the way Ellen laughs: “ It was a high-pitched, gay, melodic laugh of a kind Whitney had never heard from her before” (178). Whitney's explanation for this change is alcohol (177). Unsurprisingly “the atmosphere so charged, gay, frenetic, Whitney halfway thought he'd stepped into a celebration of some kind,” is described as a “distinctly female atmosphere in the room, Whitney thought; with an undercurrent of hysteria” (180-1). The classically patriarchal tropes of hysteria (see 2.) and disorder (“something feverish”) undermine a positive portrayal of Ellen and her daughters as no longer oppressed.

Although Whitney notices Ellen's “childlike relief” and the girls' “vast relief ... [with] a curious hilarity beneath [it],” wondering if “they'd been expecting someone else,” he suspects that “perhaps Quinn had not gone, after all” (177, 178, 181). Ellen's hurried removal of her “stained apron,” however, encourages the possibility that she and the girls have been expecting the police (181).

Ellen's transformation exceeds the realm of body language. Her way of dealing with her body in terms of fashion contrasts sharply with her description as Quinn

Paxton's wife; she wears “stained slacks, a smock, an apron,” “no makeup, not even lipstick,” her hair is “brushed back indifferently” (178). From Whitney's perspective, she, however, by no means embodies emancipation from the chains of fashion; she “thus look[s] younger, more vulnerable than Whitney had ever seen her” (178). Ellen's disinterest in creating an acceptable appearance in terms of patriarchy is interpreted as feminine and associated with weakness. Her rejection of high heels as a source of immobility is depicted in similar terms: “[Ellen] seemed smaller, more petite than Whitney would have guessed” (178).

A further interesting aspect is Ellen's new power of speech. The Other now talks back and alludes to the death of the center: “[Quinn]'s gone.' 'Gone--? [Whitney's reaction implies that he is puzzled]' 'On a business trip,’” “No need to anatomize Quinn!” (179). These allusions are accompanied by Ellen's laughter, which mocks the patriarchal power that she has triumphed over. Whitney realizes the strangeness of her “memorized” words and the possibility that her explanation for Quinn's absence is a lie (179). He, however, does not assume that the source of the lie is Ellen and he, as the representative of patriarchal culture, is the one who is lied to. Whitney “deduce[s] that Quinn had gone off with his latest women friend ... [and] managed to convince his credulous wife that he was on one of his “confidential” business trips, and she seemed satisfied by- grateful for? - the explanation” (180). Ellen's triumphant behavior is once more interpreted as representative for feminine weakness: “How women crave being lied to - being deluded! Poor Ellen” (180).

The allusions to Quinn's death are followed by Quinn's thorough erasure: “*Nothing* is too much trouble *now*,” “They talked of neutral matters, of travel in general ... they did not speak of, or even allude to, Quinn” (first emphasis mine 182, 185). Whitney evokes the trope of betrayal to disempower his observations of Ellen and the girls' speech: “Do they know? ... That Quinn has betrayed them?” (182). Although the omission of Quinn's name on Whitney's present is associated with Ellen's revenge, it is presented in a similar, harmless way: as a “petty and inconsequential a revenge” (186)

The theme of Christmas presents is another instance of ambiguity that is assigned a clear meaning in Whitney's discourse. Even though Whitney is “astonished to realize that, on the very eve of their ambitious trip abroad, his

sister-in-law and nieces had given themselves up to a frenzy of Christmas preparations,” he does not consider that Ellen and the girls are concealing a crime scene (181-2). Their behavior is interpreted as typically feminine: “How like women, to be thinking of others at such a time! No wonder their faces were so bright and feverish, their eyes glittering manic” (182). What undermines this reading is the presence of tools that are by no means associated with the packaging of Christmas presents: “gardening shears,” “claw-headed hammer, pliers, another gardening shears, a butcher knife with a broken point, Quinn’s electric carving knife” (184). Although Quinn’s carving knife signifies murder in Whitney’s premonition, it does not keep this meaning for Whitney in the context of Christmas preparations. As the girls forbid him to peek at the murderous tools, he only thinks that “they didn’t want him to discover his own Christmas present” (184).

Ellen’s new mobility and power are also signified by the “preparations not for a brief vacation but for a very long trip:” the “slipcovers on the living room furniture, rolled-up carpets, and, again ... a number of boxes, suitcases, and small trunks” (186). Having freed herself from Quinn, Ellen is about to leave her old life together with her girls, thus forming a women-only family, a matriarchy. Whitney, however, denies Ellen’s decision-making power. It is Quinn, the patriarch, who is once again considered to be the source of Ellen’s peculiar behavior: “apparently Quinn had tricked Ellen into agreeing to some sort of wild plan, to his own advantage, as always” (186).

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, “The Premonition” indeed reveals the connection between gender, language, and power in the context of patriarchy. The focalization by Whitney depicts Ellen as the weak, subordinated Other to Quinn’s authority of the center. Even facing Quinn’s absence and Ellen’s signs of empowerment, Whitney interprets all details in favor for Quinn’s power portraying Ellen as still weak and powerless. The inability to portray the female Other from Whitney’s male point of view is not only relevant for a gender-oriented reading of the short story; moreover, this silence reveals the attitude towards women and action in Western culture. The motifs are too familiar to modern-day reader: a victimized wife and her children who suffer under the tyranny of an abusive husband. The familiarity of this

depiction originates in the news media. According to Byerly and Ross,

The media, and in particular television with its huge audience share, ... perform a crucial function in their gendered framing of the public issue and in the gendered discourses that they persistently promote. If news media fail to report the views of women judges, women parliamentarians, or women business leaders, but always report on violent crimes against women, then it is hardly surprising that the public fail to realize that women do in fact occupy significant roles in society, or, equally, that men are much more likely to be victims of serious crime than women. (40)

Considering Byerly and Ross' description, the news media treats women just as Whitney treats Ellen leaving their actions and achievements mostly unreported. Fifteen years after the publishing of "The Premonition" the findings of the Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 (GMMP) paint a similar picture. Thus,

[o]nly 24% of the people heard or read about in print, radio and television news are female. In contrast, 76% - more than 3 out of 4 - of the people in the news are male, (WACC vii) [f]emale news subjects are identified by their family status 4 times more than male news subjects. ... Identifying women by their family status and at the same time playing down their roles in their communities masks women's other identities as independent, autonomous beings, active participants in the wider society beyond the home. (WACC vii-iii)

Since "[s]ubjects in stories by female reporters are equally as likely as subjects in stories by male reporters to be identified by their family status," the reason for this treatment of female subjects is more likely to be an internalized concept of gender rather than the sex of the reporter (viii). Since this concept originates in patriarchy, which is still influential in Western culture, it is not surprising that "[t]he highest disparity is in the professions. Of the total number of news subjects identified ... as educators ... 69% are male, as health professionals (69%), as legal professionals (83%), as public/civil servants (83%), and as scientists (90%)" (viii, 8). The manipulative effect of this treatment in favor for patriarchy is obvious: "Women's share in all professions is much higher in reality. The picture seen through the news becomes one of a world where women are almost absent as participants in work outside the home" (8). Given the impact of patriarchy through

the voice of the media, the following “disconcerting” numbers are unsurprising: “[There is an] imbalance in fundamental topics of import to gender equality: in stories on human rights, only 34% of news subjects are female, on education (34%), on health (33%), on poverty (29%) and on development (25%)” (7). Thus, although feminist struggles have changed women's situations all over the globe given the reality of employment, fiction just like Oates' short story and non-fictional media show that women still occupy a marginal position in Western society ideologically. As long as Ellens' deeds, no matter if serious crime or a(n) (un)lucky coincidence, remain erased from Whitneys' dominant perspectives, gender truly matters.

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