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Joyce Carol Oates' Portrayal of America as a Garden of Earthly Delights without Any Heavenly Grace

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Joyce Carol Oates, an American writer, holds a unique place in twentieth century literature. She won acclaim during her lifetime as a novelist and essayist and short story writer. The themes of Joyce Carol Oates are imposing and she portrays the social and psychological problems which are faced by the contemporary men and women in their day-to-day life. She is at her best in projecting the harsh and violent world of the present time. She presents a realistic sensation of life with a moral lesson to the reader. Joyce Carol Oates, like any other writer, selects out of the vast store of her experience. Daniel Hoffman says in his *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, "Creativity thrived with alienation, some postwar writers insisted-or at least they held that the condition of alienation which had played a nurturing role in fostering modern art, literature, and thought was too precious a heritage to sell for an academic chair or a government post" (8).

The tragic homelessness and the alienation are the basic themes of the modern writers. Oates too is accustomed with this tradition. The protest movements and the movements for social justice, the women's rights movement and a number of shocking events like the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, of Malcolm X in 1965, Martin Luther King in 1967, and of Robert Kennedy in 1968 and the Watergate Scandal, which lead to the feelings of doubt, anxiety and instability, and above all the violence in the society have been pictured in the literature of this period. So Oates's writings find no exception from the reflection of all these emotion. The drug-addicted young, unsexed and affectless begging from strangers in the streets of any large North American city was a common scene of Oates's period. There were the victims of war and they represented the anonymity of war by their very existence. Joyce Carol Oates represented this society in most of her writings.

The violent lives of Oates's ancestors also helped her in creating violence in her novels and short stories. Joyce Carol Oates's maternal grandfather was murdered in a bar room brawl. The other violent events were that her great grandfather tried unsuccessfully to kill his wife in a

fit of rage and then killed himself. Her paternal grandfather, Joseph Carleton Oates, abandoned his wife and son when the son was only two. Then twenty years later, Joseph appeared, bearing a grudge against his son wanting to fight against him but his son refused to fight against his father. Thus, the harsh and violent background of the Oates family is let at the disposal of the readers.

Her earlier writings between 1963 and 1976 have been emotionally influenced by Detroit and its suburbs and she evokes its streets, its institutions and social stratifications and its seamy violence. During her adulthood, Oates has lived within the culture of the university; it takes an important place in her fictional world. The conflict between the demands of the raw external city and the lures of the seemingly protected world of the university is an important tension in Oates's later works.

Joyce Carol Oates can be classified as an experimental writer who practised experimental writings. Experimental fiction probes the problematic situations and provides a vision of the people under pressure. Further, it reflects a persistent process of personalization and aggression as a theme. It portrays the description of violence in war in the late 1940's, the drug addiction, the sexual humiliation and the crimes of the period. It also offers a vision of people struggling to express and control their vulnerabilities.

The theme of many best-sellers in fiction in the 1950's was the American Civil War. New social world was being brought into American writings, just as it was being brought into American culture. Like in the works of John Doss Passos, James T Farrell, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, one is able to find the American novelists' response to the postwar world in Joyce Carol Oates' works. These authors practised the themes of alienation, insecurity and violence. To sum up, they had a tragic vision of life in their minds.

Sociology impresses itself with more force during this period. The influence of this can be found in the works of Joyce Carol Oates. Joyce Carol Oates' violent familial or personal background, tragic political background and her harsh social background lead to the tragic vision revealed in writings. Fear, pain, love and dreams are usually her principal themes. In novel after novel she gives her own tragic vision of America. Her themes are always imposing and they are always thickly imagined in the minds of the characters. She has also explored the themes of guilt, innocence and victimization. Hoffman stresses that "Violence in her writings is accepted, legitimized and even idealized" (253).

The present paper deals with the American culture and the social and economic facts of the American life with reference to Joyce Carol Oates's second novel *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1966). It pictures the defeat of the will of the characters who strive to overcome fate. The book's action covers forty years and three generations. The plot she uses is a kind of realism and its prose style is too mannered and self-conscious.

The novel begins with the migrant workers' problems and struggles. Carleton Walpole is a migrant worker struggling through the depression to repay debts, support his increasing family and somehow to regain his family farm. Walpole's daughter, Clara, the central character in the novel, grows along with the rest of his children with a sense of deprivation and victimization. Clara runs away with Lowry to escape from being crushed in her father's world. Carleton searches for Clara but his effort ends in vain. He finally dies realizing that he will never untangle his life or regain his lost home.

Clara is also disappointed by Lowry's homelessness and later by his abandonment. She finds a father for Lowry's unborn child in Curt Revere. Clara marries Revere and her introduction into the Revere household sets a beginning to the disintegration of the Revere family. She directly and indirectly manipulates the death of one Revere son, the disinheritance of another, the disappearance of a third and the death of Revere himself. Clara does all this to make her son, Swan, the master of the Revere household. But unfortunately, Swan's struggle for identity leads to Revere's murder and his suicide, and finally Clara ends up in an asylum.

Carleton's wife, Pearl, grows more and more withdrawn with the birth of her children and finally bleeds to death after the birth of her last baby. Carleton had no deep relationship with his wife Pearl which is evident when he soon takes up Nancy as a second wife after Pearl's death. The Carleton children are also of the same kind for they run away leaving the family. The sordid and disintegrating lives of the migrants make them shallow and greedy. Their sordid life repulses the other people also. Carleton associates his identity with his lost form and he seems intent on reclaiming his farm. As the farm becomes a distant memory both spiritually and physically, Carleton deteriorates and dies.

Clara yearns for a home, even as a child she hopes to live away from the migrant camps. In search of a secure life, a fifteen year old Clara leaves the migrant camp to the town of Tintern with Lowry. There again she is reminded of her inadequacy and lack of identity when Lowry chides her 'You don't even have a last name any more, kid'...(137). Clara first idealises Lowry, imagining him to be stable. Lowry proves otherwise by abandoning a pregnant Clara.

Clara turns to Curt Revere, whom she had met at a friend's wedding. Revere owns much of Tintern and employs most of its men. She uses Revere's attraction for her as a means to acquire a secure social status and find an identity for herself. She tries to acquire the name 'Revere' for it wields power and stability. Clara gives herself over to Revere who settles her on an unused farm. Later she convinces him as she is pregnant by him and acquires the 'Revere' name. Clara refuses Lowry later when he offers to marry her after returning from war. Though her passion for him remains untarnished, she refuses him for her son's secure future. Clara's craving for power and self-identity does not stop here.

She destroys the Revere family to make her son, Swan, the unrivalled master of the Revere household. Robert Revere, the son of Curt Revere, is mysteriously killed during a hunting expedition, Jonathan, the second son of Curt Revere, disappears from home after he bears up a girl who reminds him of Clara and the eldest son of Curt Revere, Clark, teased by Clara, makes a drunken pass at her and leaves home to escape his father's wrath. Though she succeeds in creating a secure future for her son Swan, he fails her. He shoots Curt Revere and himself which leaves Clara insane and in a nursing home, where she is often visited by Clark Revere, the oldest son of Revere.

Swan inherits his mother's insecure feelings but is much weaker than her. The root cause for his insecure feelings is his illegitimate birth and then his growth in the hostile Revere household. Clara's uncontrolled promiscuity puts Swan in an emotional turmoil. He has a confused love and admiration for his mother and Revere. He feels unconsciously responsible for the death of Robert Revere. Swan fails in his relationships with his girl friends. The insecure and impotent nature of Swan leads him to his tragic failure, and this failure makes him to murder Revere and to commit suicide.

Oates, in the progress of this novel, portrays violence at every step. This novel is filled with violence because the society it describes is likewise filled with violence. Very impressively Oates brings out the violence in the migrant camps. To preserve his image as a tough guy, Carleton kills his best friend Rafe in a barroom brawl. The local police mercilessly enter the migrant camp and beats up Bert, a fellow migrant worker of Carleton.

Earlier, Clara is introduced in the novel fighting with her older sister Sharleen. Clara's violent nature is presented in the episode where she goes into town with Rosalie. There she resists the temptation to break the glass windows of a story book house and steals a flag. She needs to destroy the peace and order of town. Clara leaves home after her father beats her up. Richard Clark Sterne points out that Clara's life with Lowry hardens her. He offers her no love, only cruel and violent sex. Lowry's violent nature influence her a lot. So when Lowry leaves a pregnant and helpless Clara, she is capable of finding a place for herself, in the Revere household.

Clara's well planned violence makes her life and Swan's life secure and permanent in Revere's house. She teaches her son the violence she has learned. Swan initially fears the horror and violence involved in killing. Clara tries to involve Swan in hunting, but Swan recoils and weeps at the sight of a dead squirrel. The same Swan later is considered to be involved in the mysterious death of Robert Revere. Later when failure and impotence suffocates him he seeks refuge in violence. Swan intends to kill his mother for using and manipulating him, but he weakens and is unable to do so.

At this time Clara tells him, "You are weak, that is what I know about you, that is my secret about you...." (439). He finally kills Revere accidentally and shoots himself submitting to his mother's goading. Mary Kathryn Grant states in *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates*, "Language is not only that power which elevates man above other Things, but it is also his only weapon against annihilation and destruction. Man recreates the world through language according to Oates" (111).

The language of violence and tragedy is used in this novel. The failure of language which leads to man's incapability and tragedy is found in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*. The language of violence is used in the migrant camps. Harsh and filthy language of the people is found here. Lowry runs out of words and flees from Clara. The failure of language thus becomes responsible for the failure of their relationship. Lowry's son Swan too meets with the same failure of language, when he tries to talk to his girl friend Loretta. He did not know the style of language and behaviour the other boys knew.

This tragic inability of Lowry and Swan leads to their destruction. Clara and Swan address Revere as they maintain a distance and non - involvement through language. Swan uses language to hurt and punish his mother. When he is torn between his love from his mother and revulsion for her suspected promiscuity, Swan calls her, "That Bitch", language fails him once again when he finally wanted to talk to his mother, this leads him to use physical language and kill Revere and himself.

Carleton's view is evident when an accident takes place in the beginning of the novel. He points out that one has to face the things in life which is in store for him and that there is no escape for him from this. He feels that the sooner it takes place the better for the incident would

be past him and he can be free of the anxiety. Clara too, to an extent, believes in destiny. She thinks that one cannot trust in anything in life and one cannot change one's fate. Clara's tragic insanity is the result of her trying to change her fate. Lowry too feels that he cannot understand things in life because nothing stays still and destiny is not in the hands of man. Swan's existence and Clara's responsibility is the destiny which prevented her reunion with Lowry.

Mary Kathryn Grant stresses that "Clara Walpoles's garden is not one of earthly delights promised in the title but a jungle of nightmare and pain" (68). The characters in this novel adopt violence to gain power but violence in reality cannot give power. It only destroys the spirit and weakens them even more. Thus in this novel the author very effectively brings out the tragic failure of Clara who at every step of her life resorted to violence to gain power, wealth and above all a secure life. Clara's lust for acquiring wealth for her son and herself leads to the death of her son and her insanity. The weapon she used to destroy others destroys her in the end.

Oates thus portrays the fact that the lust for power and man's discontented nature lead to his tragic end. A contented man is a complete man. So man should try to be content with his possessions and life. His lust for possessions leads him to his tragic failure. Alfred Kazin advocates that Oates is however a "social novelist of a peculiar kind" (198). She has an uncanny ability to give a kaleidoscopic vision of America. Oates absorbs and transmits in her fiction the terror which is often a part of living in America. Oates portrays an instructive and terrifying vision of America through this novel.

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