

Joyce Carol Oates's Remaking of Classic Stories

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The article deals with three of Joyce Carol Oates's short stories that are imaginative reworkings of great classic texts: Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Joyce's *The Dead*. In their different ways each of these stories profoundly modifies the prototypical structure, being both faithful and unfaithful to it. Together they prove that, as Laurent Jenny says, intertextuality "is a definitive rejection of the full stop which would close the meaning and freeze the form".

Joyce Carol Oates (born 1938) is a writer of prodigious creative energy. In her massive literary output she has written novels, short stories, poetry, plays and literary criticism, attaining a rare degree of excellence in all these genres. But the short story has remained in the focus of her creative interest all throughout her brilliant literary career. In fact, as many connoisseurs of her work agree, the short story is "a central concern in her work".¹ She has proved a life-long devotion to this form, exploring its possibilities by a variety of techniques. As she herself said: "Radical experimentation, which might be ill-advised in the novel, is well suited for the short story. I like the freedom and promise of the form."²

In her collection of short stories *Marriages and Infidelities*³ there appears a group of short stories which represent her programmatic remodelling of the great classic texts such as Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Joyce's *The Dead*, Chekhov's *The Lady with the Pet Dog* and Thoreau's *Where I Lived and What I Lived For*. About these short stories she said the following in the interview she gave to Joe David Bellamy:

"These stories are meant to be autonomous stories, yet they are also testaments of my love and extreme devotion to these other writers; I imagine a kind of spiritual

1. William Abrahams, "Stories of a Visionary", *Saturday Review*, 23, September, 1972, p. 76.

2. Michael Schumacher, "Joyce Carol Oates and the Hardest Part of Writing", *Writer's Digest*, April, 1986, p. 34.

3. Joyce Carol Oates, *Marriages and Infidelities*, Vanguard Press, New York, 1972.

“marriage” between myself and them, or let’s say our “daimons” in the Yeatsian sense – exactly in the Yeatsian sense, which is so exasperating and irrational!”⁴

These stories represent a highly interesting case of intertext. As Laurent Jenny says, in intertextual citation “the semantic relaunching takes place whenever the element is placed in a new context.” He argues that: “In general, the new context seeks to subdue the borrowed text to its own requirements. Either this intention remains hidden, and then the intertextual reworking amounts to a “paint job” whose effectiveness depends on how skilfully the borrowed text is adapted, or else the new context proclaims its critical rewriting and gives a demonstration of how a text is reworked.”⁵

Joyce Carol Oates’s short stories obviously fall in the latter category. This article will be concerned with three of these stories, each of which powerfully reconstitutes the meaning of the architext, “encircling it, enclosing it within another discourse.”⁶

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As Joyce Carol Oates profoundly admires the art of Thomas Mann, it is only natural that among the great classic texts she reimagined there should be one by him. Her story, bearing the title “The Turn of the Screw”, is a remake of *Death in Venice*. It differs from her reimagining of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and Joyce’s *The Dead*. It is a special case because a very free reimagining of the characteristic themes and motives of *Death in Venice* is interpenetrated with the pervasive Jamesian influence so that her remake is, in fact, a contamination of two textual presences, Mann’s and James’s.

The outline of her story is very simple. The place of action: somewhere on a “wide stony beach” in England. The time of action: the Victoria jubilee. The main characters: a middle-aged writer who has come to the seaside resort under the threat of a fatal illness and a young man escorting an elderly uncle who is rich and whose wealth he will presumably inherit. The middle-aged writer becomes infatuated with the young man and daily writes him letters in which he takes the role of his guardian spirit and admonishes him to live his life to the full. The young man, who is erotically obsessed with various woman and has, at the beginning of the short story, a brief sexual encounter with a vagrant girl on the shore, receives these letters with interest but reads their message in his own way as a call to live beyond morality. At the end of this short story, the middle-aged writer, who is fully in the grip of his obsession, thinks he has received a “benediction” from the young man. What happens, in fact, is that he casually encounters the young man and reads his gesture as a “benediction”.

While following the main motive of Mann’s *Death in Venice*, that of Aschenbach’s infatuation with Tadzio, the Oates story crosses it with the Jamesian motive which gets its most powerful articulation in the poignant injunction which the middle-aged Strether

4. *The New Fiction, Interviews with Innovative American Writers* by Joe David Bellamy, University of Illinois Press, 1974, p. 22.

5. Laurent Jenny, “The Strategy of Form”, in *French Literary Theory Today, A Reader*, ed. by Tzvetan Todorov, Cambridge University Press, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, trans. by R. Carter, 1982, p. 60. and p. 58.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

gives to the young American Chad in *The Ambassadors* and which is summed up by the words: "Live all you can. It's a mistake not to." The warning which Strether, a shy and diffident spectator of life's spectacle, an onlooker and never a participant, gives to the young man as the bitter fruit of his life's experience enters as a textual element into the Oates story, enriching it with its overtones.

The obsession of the middle-aged writer with the young man in the Oates story – a strange blend of eroticism and spirituality – echoes Aschenbach's fascination with Tadzio. In its intensity, its exclusiveness, its utter disproportion to reality, it cannot be measured by any standard external to itself. Like Aschenbach's sombre passion which burns him out, it represents a fantastic structure which the mind raises, nourishing itself on the subjective emotions which are out of all proportion to what takes place in outer reality. Subjectivism is the basic premise of the total action as in *Death in Venice*, whose basic thrust, in spite of the fact that the narration is unfolded in the third person, is towards radical subjectivity (we never see Tadzio apart from Aschenbach). In Oates the subjectivity is achieved by the usage of the convention of diary writing. (She refers to it in the already quoted interview as a "Victorian cliché" – which is in keeping with the ambiance of the story and the time in which it takes place). While keeping out of her story many of the thematic elements of Mann's *Death in Venice* which make up its incredible semantic richness, she strongly foregrounds an element which is present in Mann but is not given priority, namely the absence of communication between the two main actors in this drama of the spirit. As E.A. Dyson states in his article on *Death in Venice*: "Isolated from his past and from any possible future he (Aschenbach) passes also out of the range of effectual communication – whether with the beloved, or with his fellow men, or with himself."⁷ Aschenbach, whose inner life is raised to the point of incandescence by his illicit passion, communicates with the object of his infatuation only in "enigmatic glances". And while the privateness of the dominant experience, the primacy of the subjective consciousness, is stressed by both writers, Joyce Carol Oates shifts the gravity centre of the referent text, changes the hierarchic order of its constitutive elements and rearranges it, with new priorities established. Oates heavily foregrounds the insularity of the dominant passion and solipsism as the premise of the experience of reality. Unless we take longing as a frustrated form of communication, the Oates story strongly stresses the complete absence of communication between her two characters, whose lives so strangely interpenetrate but at the same time solipsistically revolve round their respective private obsessions.

While basing her story on the main thematic motive of Mann's *Death in Venice* – Aschenbach's infatuation – Oates leaves out whole complexes of its rich thematic cluster. Aschenbach's intense preoccupation with the aesthetic values and with the moral ambivalence of art is absent in Oates. Mann's profound questioning of the inter-relationship of Eros and civilization, Eros and art, Eros and Thanatos, as well as of the turbid sources of artistic creation in the context of his general problematizing of the relation of the consciousness to the unconsciousness is equally absent from Oates. There is no rift in the main character between his conscious and his unconscious life, and the Oates story does not recapitulate the source text in its labyrinthine descent into the depth

7. A.E. Dyson, "The Stranger God: *Death in Venice*", *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 1971, p. 6.

of the main character's unconsciousness. In her story, death is present as a threat, as a shadow hanging over both the middle-aged writer, whose infatuation the story traces, and over the rich uncle whom the young man escorts. It is present also in the form of the intense revulsion against the processes of ageing and biological decay which the young man feels. But death as an obverse side of Eros, death as an omnipotent presence imbuing every detail of both internal and external reality, is absent from Oates. Also, the strange force of the ambiance, the rich atmosphere of overripeness and decadence, of rottenness at the heart of so much splendour, which characterizes Mann's Venice and which acts in powerful congruence with what takes place in the inner reality, is not mimicked by Oates in her story *The Turn of the Screw*.

Oates takes some textual fragments from Mann – primarily Aschenbach's obsession – and contaminates it with the thematic elements from James, finding “analogous points” where they are congruent.⁸ These analogous points are: a predominant concern with the intangible internal reality, an adventure of the emotions and of the spirit, which in the Jamesian universe has the highest priority, and the concern with the refractions and distortions of the subjective perspective of which James, like Mann, was a passionate and profound student.

The complex imagery, the dense symbolic structure of Mann's tale, with its constant parallelisms between the outer and the inner reality which give such rich resonances to his narrative texture, are not mimicked by Oates, who sketches the basic situation in her short story with quick, vigorous touches and pithy, robust characterization of persons and events.

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8. The term is used by Renate Lachmann in her study of intertextuality in the work of A. Beli. In her article on *St. Petersburg* Renate Lachmann studies intertextuality in this early modernist novel. She demonstrates how Beli uses the literary models of Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, Gogol's *The Petersburg Tales*, Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* and Dostojevski's *Crime and Punishment* to create a complex field of reference. In studying the forms this intertextuality takes and the multiple relations between the referent texts and the manifest text, she establishes interesting terminological distinctions and works out a typology of devices used by Beli in his novel. She states that the alien elements by means of which the manifest text is linked to the source text or the referent text are presented by Beli mainly in two ways: as “contamination” and as “anagram”. In her words: “Contamination is a result of the selection of individual elements from various referent texts and a combination of these elements in the sense of their montage or overlapping and their inclusion in the manifest text. The primary referent framework of some element is forsaken as well as its value in the textual tonality, and a link is established with the elements of some other alien texts. Thus heterogenous clusters or layers are born: after the process of taking apart, there occurs the process of putting together of a new pattern. In contrast to this, an anagram consists of the elements ranged over the whole manifest text which, when they are linked, make possible the recognition of the coherent structure of an alien text; the referent text is, so to say, present as an “anatekt”. The anagrammatic structure of the alien text creates a “structural enigma” which is decoded by means of retrospective and prospective reading, while the contaminational signal demands a reading which by way of compensation re-establishes the individual primary textual orders and re-directs these recognized elements back to their framework”. Renate Lachmann, “Intertekstualnost kao konstitucija smisla (*Petrograd Andreja Belog i 'tudi tekstovi'*)”, *Intertekstualnost i intermedijalnost*, Zavod za znanost o književnosti, Zagreb, 1988, pp. 101–102 (translation mine).

Another classic story Joyce Carol Oates reimagined is Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The double patterning reveals that profound similarity goes hand in hand with radical dissimilarity. If "unsteadying our trust in the reliability of every day occurrences" represents the hallmark of Kafka's universe, "the most obscure lucidity in the history of literature" represents the hallmark of Kafka's style.⁹ While Joyce Carol Oates respects fully the first characteristics, she does not mimick the second. She reimagines the central situation within the medium of psychological realism, without taking recourse to the oneiric and the grotesque, without using the gnomic and the parabolic forms which distinguish Kafka's style. How then does she "unsteady our trust in the reliability of everyday occurrences", how does she bring about the fateful metamorphosis?

The protagonist of her story is, like Kafka's, a common salesman. Like Kafka's hero, he is subjected to terrible punishment for no definable guilt, but he does not get transformed into something out of nature; he suffers a stroke of paralysis and dies. Thus Oates repeats in her own way the deep structure of *The Metamorphosis*: a fateful change of mode of being, resulting in the total alienation of the hero from the others, a stroke of fate which brings interminable suffering and finally the agony of death. I will enumerate briefly the basic reference points of the structure of Kafka's story which Oates is faithful to:

- 1) An abrupt and unaccountable transformation occurs and creates an insurmountable barrier between the hero and his ambience. (In Oates it is a severe stroke of paralysis which removes the control of bodily functions.)
- 2) The hero preserves a dim sense of the continuity of the self but communication is impossible. While attempts at communication are made on both sides of the barrier, they are soon given up in despair as they are utterly ineffectual.
- 3) There occurs the breakdown of communication. In Kafka, incomprehension quickly gives way to either brutal hostility or icy indifference. In Oates, love gives way to indifference or revulsion.
- 4) The state of affairs which is irreparable ends in ignoble death among the unheeding kinsmen.

The basic deep structure is the same in Oates as in Kafka: the disturbance, defamiliarizing the familiar, distancing the protagonist abruptly from the familiar routine and the habitual world, plunges him unaccountably into chaos and pain. The kafkaesque formula – chaos erupting in the midst of the commonplace and the everyday, without warnings, without preliminaries – is recapitulated by Oates. The known world is irreversibly changed, its coordinates dislodged beyond recall.

But while the archetypal kafkaesque situation is enacted, the stylistic contrast is great. At the beginning of Kafka's story, a fantastic transformation is calmly announced in a matter-of-fact way. The reader is plunged into the central situation explored by the story without any attempt to make the implausible plausible. The central event is essentially a mystery but, however fantastic, it impresses itself upon the reader's mind with an overwhelming reality of its meticulous presentation. At the beginning of the story by Joyce Carol Oates, the scenic background is carefully built up; the reader is gradually

9. Erich Heller, *Kafka*, Fontana Modern Masters, 1974.

led into the central situation, a bodily transformation owing to a disfiguring and fatal illness. The building up of the setting, the introduction of the situation into which the main protagonist will be plunged, is done fully within the context of realistic narrative. The day of the car salesman is evoked in circumstantial detail, with the only ominous signal of what will shortly follow in the shape of an unaccountable day-dream in which he envisions without knowing his own immediate future. In his day-dream there appears an enshrouded figure inspiring terror.

While Kafka uses a system of obscure motivation all throughout (why is Gregor Samsa so terribly transformed, what agency effected it, what was the purpose behind it), Oates practices a system of clear motivation which carries the narrative forward and within which every narrative event is fully explained. The characteristic kafkaesque feature of blurring the outlines between the real and the fantastic, possible and impossible, ordinary and surrealistic, is wholly absent in Oates. The gnomic quality is equally absent in Oates, whose style clears up all uncertainties and does not cultivate ambiguities.

To sum up: if Heller's dictum on Kafka's world that "his is an art more poignantly and disturbingly obscure than literature has ever known" does not hold good for Oates, his archetypal situation of the dislocation of reality and the displacement of the protagonist owing to the defamiliarizing of the familiar world is ingeniously reimagined by Oates.

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In its basic structure, Joyce Carol Oates's story *The Dead* follows closely Joyce's famous story. Both stories mix some autobiographical elements¹⁰ with textual fragments from some literary models. It is a curious feature of Joyce's story that, as Richard Ellmann ascertains in his book *James Joyce*, he took over the basic situation and its development from the now forgotten novel by George Moore entitled *Vain Fortune*. The love triangle, the situation in which the dead lover intrudes himself between the living lovers, and the feeling of weary resignation that characterizes the main protagonist at the end of the story, were absorbed by Joyce and powerfully reimagined. It became organized, in a typical Joycean manner, round an inner crisis which culminates in the revelation of an inner truth which has up to that moment been kept from the full knowledge of the main character and now, under the impact of a seemingly slight external event, it fully enters his consciousness. The Joycean ending gains in power and complexity as he portrays Gabriel Conroy's overwhelming feeling of resignation which includes all the living and all the dead in his final sense of defeat and doom.

Joyce Carol Oates's story reimagines the Joycean model. The associational framework in which the Joycean reminiscences bring in their values make of it an echoing chamber, resounding with the double pattern, her own and Joyce's. The Joycean model is imaginatively transposed to another ambiance and time, the double measure making

10. See Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, New York, 1959, pp. 252–263, and *The New Fiction* by Joe David Bellamy.

its internal harmonies more complex. In both stories a sudden sharply vivid memory of a dead person (direct in the case of Oates's protagonist, vicariously experienced in Joyce's protagonist) brings their inner life to a crisis which represents a moment of truth, with all pretensions torn off. A preoccupation with time, memory and identity characterizes both stories. In both stories the dead person who is suddenly evoked in memory sets a standard of feeling which is sadly absent from the present. In Joyce's story the dead youth Michael Furey, who once loved Gabriel's wife Gretta, is with his singleness of passion superior to the living and is used as a contrast to their passionless existence. In Oates's story the dead boy Emmett whom Ilena remembers, who was once her student and who loved her, is set in vivid contrast with her own incompleteness and incoherence, which are a concomitant of the disintegrative processes going on in her own being. In both stories a dramatic climax is reached in the silent self-communings of the major character, who thus achieves a new quality of self-recognition.

While the main protagonist holds the centre of the stage, the wider social implications of his case are constantly present in both stories. In writing *The Dubliners*, Joyce, as he himself said, wanted to write "the moral chapter" in the history of his city and country so that all the fifteen stories of *The Dubliners*, culminating with *The Dead*, take place in the ambiance of the "paralysed city", each story mirroring general stagnation. Joyce Carol Oates's story effects a transposition of the Joycean deep structure into another ambiance and time, that of America in the sixties. If, as Florence Waltzl says in her article on Joyce's *The Dead*,¹¹ one of the implications of his stories in *The Dubliners* is that Ireland betrays her children and is betrayed by them in turn, the same may be said for Oates's story: America betrays her children and is betrayed by them. The ambiance and the self are inextricably linked in Oates's story as in Joyce's.

Both stories are concerned with the state of death-in-life and both move towards the stasis of death at the end. It is instructive to compare the endings of both stories because it demonstrates very well the double patterning Oates practices throughout in her remodelling of the Joycean structural paradigm.

Both endings move towards the stasis of death. Both give expression to the final feelings of the protagonists, summing up their central life situations. But there are subtle differences within the basic structural model. In Joyce, the dominant emotional tonality is that of sadness and weariness, in Oates it is a sharp sense of loss and despair. Joyce's Gabriel has an overwhelming sense of the slow process of decay (moral, spiritual and emotional), going on in himself and others as a function of being immersed in the irreversible flow of time. Oates's Ilena has a sharp sense of self-betrayal, of the reckless squandering of her gifts and her life, of the destructive processes in her being gaining ground.

In Joyce's story, the landscape plays a powerful role as an outer correlative of the inner action. The snow landscape in Joyce suddenly opens a cosmic perspective on a particularized event and is the prefiguration of the apocalyptic "last end", explicitly mentioned by the text. The dominant melancholic feeling of the main protagonist as he watches the snow falling accompanies his strong sense of the irreversible flow of time,

11. Florence L. Waltzl, "Gabriel and Michael: The Conclusion of 'The Dead'", *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1967, p. 27.

corroding values and relationships, ending in the stasis of death. This feeling is exteriorized by the image of the snow falling all over Ireland, levelling all configurations of terrain, enshrouding the earth, bringing everything to a state of final inertia and silence. Joyce's Gabriel, his soul "swooning" as he listens to the snow falling, has an almost mystical sense of the interdependence of all life as well as a sensation of the dissolution of the solid world into something impalpable, immaterial, which is a part of the general movement of his thought towards death and non-being. His final emotion is resignation, giving in to weariness and sleep and, by extension of meaning, death.¹²

Joyce Carol Oates structures her ending in such a way that she closely follows the Joycean model, echoing the key words, using the same reference points but introducing subtle modifications all throughout.¹³ In a searing moment of self-recognition, Ilena realizes how profoundly she has betrayed her innermost self. Her sharp sense of the disintegrative processes going on in herself and in the people round her, most particularly her lovers, is crystallized in the image of their personalities flowing into one another, becoming indistinguishable from one another, becoming one gigantic, amorphous, gelatinous mass in which the individuation principle has been extinguished. As Gabriel, whose thoughts move towards the stasis of death, thinks with pleasure of the snow falling outside and enshrouding the world, Ilena in an "elation of fatigue" thinks of the snow falling outside with relief, thinks of the world beyond the clammy, sticky, embarrassing and frustrating humanity, suggesting the peace and "otherness" of death, silence and non-being.

Although with less intensity, she also uses the snow landscape, with the same basic connotations. Joyce uses complex imagery to enrich the realistic narrative. His use of detail is a link between naturalism and symbolism, as Harry Levin noticed long ago. Joyce Carol Oates's robust realism has at its core the Joycean prototype, which it both discloses and conceals, and becomes all the richer for its constant evocation of both similarities and subtle differences.

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In conclusion we can say that each of the stories by Joyce Carol Oates, which represents a conscious remaking of a classic text, differs from the others in its procedures.

12. In his sensitive and thorough-going interpretation of Joyce Carol Oates's story *The Dead* in juxtaposition to Joyce's Winfried Herget takes a different standing. He says: "Für die Entfaltung des Geschehens und die Gestaltung der Hauptfiguren haben die Schlussszenen der beiden Erzählungen einen unterschiedlichen Stellenwert. Gabriel gelangt zu einem Wendepunkt, eine positive Entwicklungsfähigkeit wird ihm zugestanden. Ilena dagegen wird am Ende eines Prozesses der Persönlichkeitszerstörung gezeigt, der sich als ein allmähliches Absterben durch Betäubung der seelischen Regungen, Abstumpfung der körperlichen Empfindungen und geistige Lähmung vollzogen hat". "Joyce Carol Oates' Re-Imaginationen", in *Theorie und Praxis im Erzählen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. Studien zur englischen und amerikanischen Literatur zu Ehren von Willi Erzgraber*, ed. by W. Herget, K.P. Jochum, and I. Weber, Tübingen, Narr, 1986, p. 362.

13. Cf. Winfried Herget, op. cit.

Her story *The Turn of the Screw* is based on *Death in Venice* but, in using this literary model, she amplifies certain of its constitutive elements and ignores others. She rearranges the hierarchy of its elements and while some are heavily foregrounded, others are relegated to the background or obliterated. Moreover, she contaminates elements from Mann with elements from James in constructing what Renate Lachmann calls “analogous points”.

Oates's story *The Metamorphosis* is an ingenious reworking of the archetypal kafkaesque model in a different literary medium. She avoids the usage of the fantastic, the oneiric and the grotesque and recreates the kafkaesque archetype in the medium of psychological realism.

Finally, her remodelling of Joyce's story *The Dead* follows closely the referent text while subtly shifting the accents within the same basic structure and thus establishes the double measure, which greatly enriches the narrative texture of her story.

Thus Joyce Carol Oates's stories prove that “intertextuality is a way of spelling out the functioning of text, a “verifying” of reading through writing. It is a definitive rejection of the full stop which would close the meaning and freeze the form.”¹⁴

INTERTEKSTUALNOST U PRIČAMA JOYCE CAROL OATES

Članak razmatra tri kratke priče Joyce Carol Oates koje re-interpretiraju klasične tekstove: *Smrt u Veneciji* Thomasa Manna, Kafkinu *Metamorfozu* i Joyceovu pripovijest *Mrtvi*. Na osebujan način svaka od tih priča dubinski modificira prototipnu strukturu, ostajući joj vjerna i iznevjeravajući je u isto vrijeme. Zajedno, one potvrđuju misao Laurenta Jennyja da intertekstualnost “definitivno odbacuje stavljanje točke koja bi dovršila značenje i zamrzнула oblik”.

14. Laurent Jenny, “The Strategy of Form”, p. 60.