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Nightmare Visions of Eden: Recollections of Home in Joyce Carol Oates's "By the River"

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> Temptation, sin, fall, and expiation, all around in a circle, into the garden and out of it, many angels, great blazes of rhetoric and light. [. . .] As if it mattered that there was ever a paradise, or in what way it was lost to us—the only important thing is that we have no paradise; we have none.[1]

The emphatic disavowal of the existence of paradise which Max, a character in Joyce Carol Oates's first novel *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), voices in speaking of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has set the tone for many of the novels and short stories which Oates has published in the course of her prolific career. Very much like Max and other fictional characters, Oates seems to be obsessed by man's expulsion from Eden. The defiant disavowal of the reality of paradise does, however, not at all eliminate the longing for an eventual return to an Edenic existence. Indeed, the trope of paradise regained is the predominant focus of Oates's entire oeuvre, and it certainly forms the ideological backdrop for her mournful portrayals of modern life. Moreover, the fact that Oates has transformed Erie County, the world of her childhood in rural upstate New York into the fictional Eden County as the setting of many of her novels and short stories,[2] further testifies to the author's preoccupation with the prelapsarian world of her childhood.

Again and again Oates recreates images of her personal past, as if by conjuring up the world of her childhood she could define a space in which an original self still exists.[3] Thus, in her seminal essay "My Father, My Fiction," Oates qualifies the autobiographical impulse which informs her writing as an "attempt to memorialize [her] parents' vanished world."[4] Yet Oates's endeavor to "*evoke that world* [of her father], that America,

rapidly passing from memory" is not only an act of preserving an authentic vision of her parents' past. Rather, the argument of "My Father, My Fiction" shows that the world Oates tries to recapture in her novels and stories is very much the pastoral world of her own past (and only by implication also that of her parents); consequently, Oates vents her sense of loss primarily in terms of a personal tragedy:

> Now, decades later, nothing remains of the Bush farm. My childhood seems to have been plowed under, gone subterranean as a dream. The old house was razed years ago when the country highway was widened, the old barn was dismantled, all of the fruit orchard has vanished. *My* lilac tree near the back door, *my* apple tree at the side of the house, *my* cherry tree . . . long uprooted, gone. [. . .] The old farmhouse in Millersport was razed in 1960, yet there is a dream of mine in which I wake yet again to find myself there, in my old room—the first of the countless rooms of my life. ("My Father, My Fiction," 80ff.)

As Oates explicitly asserts the autobiographical underpinnings of her oeuvre, the reader may feel induced to perceive her fictional Eden County as a soul-searching imaginary "re-presentation" of the vanished world of her childhood. Indeed, the writer's retrospective glorification of the past and her compulsive artistic returning to her childhood world could very well be seen as the result of the "effort of the [artist's] Ego to communicate with a deeper self."[5] Yet even if one could prove that an autobiographical impulse is an essential factor in the genesis of Oates's oeuvre and that her art originates in an act of communication with a hidden self, one would be misled in proposing a reading which simplistically paralleled the life of her fictional characters with her own life, and treated the author's artistic constructs as factographic accounts of her own biography. Oates's works may well be obsessive reenactments of homecoming, attempts at coming to terms with the writer's personal past, but, first and foremost, they are objectified efforts to analyze the past and the present in the light of the highly problematic impact which America's fundamental belief in the possibility of establishing a second paradise in the New World has had upon the individual.

Like many American writers before her, Oates seeks to explore the psychological effects of America's self-stylization as a second Eden. Her characters' incessant attempts to conjure up an earthly paradise in the face

of its indisputable absence shows that American society is more than ever before influenced by a pastoral ideology which, for several centuries, has defined popular images of the New World. Yet, most of the characters who inhabit Oates's imaginary Eden (County) have realized that the dream they have been brought up to believe in is a mere illusion. They have come to understand that their rural Eden and its promise of individual self-realization[6] have not only been destroyed by the encroachments of modern civilization, but primarily by their own spiritual and moral disorientation. The germ of destruction has always been present and active in Oates's extremely ironic representations of paradise, and one may even assume that the characters forfeit their return to an earthly Eden by the very obsession with which they try to salvage it.

The short story "By the River," which was first published in 1968,[7] is one of Joyce Carol Oates's most intriguing explorations of the theme of man's expulsion from Eden and the ensuing effort to return to a prelapsarian state of being. In this story, Oates once more transforms the physical geography of her own childhood near Millersport, New York, into the symbolic space of her fictional Eden County. But here Eden is not only the concretization of a national myth, but also a place which represents the very essence of home. The protagonist's return to Eden (County) is a homecoming, both in the literal sense of coming home to the place where one spent one's childhood and where one's family still lives, and in the figurative sense of a return to a state in which one's metaphysical homelessness is overcome. But just as the physical space of childhood is transformed into the psychological space of one's "still-being-one-with-the-world," i.e. into a state of being before one's "fall" into self-consciousness and into the awareness of time, home becomes primarily a mental category, a projection of psychological needs and desires onto the once real "space" of childhood.

"By the River" explores a young woman's personal visions of home, and it does so by analyzing the ways in which these visions are determined by her parents' and the entire nation's compulsive belief in the possibility of establishing a New World Garden of Eden. When Helen, the protagonist of the story, returns home after a brief absence, she finds herself confronted with a world which stubbornly embraces this very belief in an edenic future. Yet while her father still clings to the dream of a second Eden and

blindly worships at its shrine, Helen has come to understand that her own belief in an earthly paradise has been false from the very beginning. Although she hopes that coming home will enable her to overcome the disorientation she has suffered from during her absence, this homecoming evokes rather ambivalent feelings.

As the story begins, we encounter Helen in the waiting room of the local bus station, where she expects to meet her father whom she informed the night before of her arrival. She has just returned to the small country town she grew up in and longs to be taken home to her parents' farm in Eden County. The narration offers the reader direct access to Helen's observations and thoughts. Since her mind nervously skips from one observation and recollection to another, the narrative is rather disorganized and confusing, but eventually the reader is, at least partially, able to solve the puzzle of Helen's past and to make sense of the disturbing jumble of often contradictory recollections. In spite of the seemingly incoherent mental leaps in the protagonist's recollections the reader thus learns that Helen abandoned her husband and baby for another man. The hidden impulses that determine Helen's actions remain, however, in the dark. In ruminating over the impulses that made her leave, the young woman is neither able to explain why she ran away in the first place, nor why she returned in the false belief that she could "go back to her old life without any more fuss" (112).

The young woman's thoughts keep going back to events in her childhood, especially that "muddy spring day when her family had first moved to this part of the country [i.e. Eden County]" (115). As Helen impatiently awaits her father's arrival and becomes more and more afraid of the consequences of her disloyalty to her own family and to her parents, she turns her mind to the "big old house" that in her memory always promised shelter and protection from the frightening world outside. Giving in to her impulses of wishful thinking, Helen is absolutely convinced that "[n]othing about it [will] have changed," and when she tries to "think of what had brought her back," she suddenly realizes that it had "something to do with her family's house and that misty, warm day seventeen years ago when they had first moved in" (115). It was this image of the past which, a day before, suddenly made her understand that "she did not

belong there in the city" (115) and that she should return home immediately.

When her father finally picks her up and drives her home along backcountry dirt roads, Helen is somewhat irritated by his unusual taciturnity and strange behavior. As she seeks to overcome her exasperation and to regain her self-confidence, she once more tries to envisage the day when her family moved to the countryside. However, this time her father's awkwardness tarnishes the vision of the past she is able to recapture:

> His shoulder wasn't as comfortable as it should have been. But she closed her eyes, trying to force sleep. She remembered that April day they had come here—their moving to the house that was new to them, a house of their own they would have to share with no one else, but a house it turned out had things wrong with it, secret things that had made Helen's father furious. She could not remember the city and the house they had lived in there, but she had been old enough to sense the simplicity of the country and the eagerness of her parents, and then the angry perplexity that had followed. The family was big—six children then, before Arthur died at ten—and half an hour after they had moved in, the house was crowded and shabby. And then she remembered being frightened at something and her father picking her up in the middle of moving, and not asking her why she cried [. . .] but rock[ing] her and comfort[ing] her with his rough hands. And she could remember how the house had looked so well: the ballooning curtains in the windows, the first things her mother had put up. The gusty spring air, already too warm, smelling of good earth and the Eden River not too far behind them, and leaves, sunlight, wind [. . .], and her father had brought them all out here to the country. A new world, a new life. (117-18)

The passage just quoted allows the reader to gather some information about Helen's vision of the past and the memories attached to her first "real" home, but it also becomes obvious that the few pieces of the jigsaw puzzle we obtain piecemeal, here and elsewhere in the story, will never allow for a satisfactory reconstruction of her past. The information we can gather from Helen's recollections is characterized by gaps and irritating contradictions. We learn only that "something" was wrong with the house, that "something" caused her parents' unspecified perplexity, and that "something" frightened Helen, but because we are given no more information than Helen's obscure associations can offer, we are not able to overcome our own state of perplexity. Too many aspects of Helen's

former life seem to be censured and repressed, too many attempts at gaining access to the past seem to be aborted at an early stage. Moreover, as Helen will never reach her parents' home alive, we will not even be confronted with a reality which might serve as a foil against which Helen's fragmentary recollections may be measured.

In addition, the few data we can gather from Helen's recollections display a number of contradictions, and thus they offer a rather unstable basis for any attempt at reconstructing the past. While the few initial references to the day when the family moved to the farm ("muddy spring day," "misty, warm day," 115) evoke the image of a rather miserable, muddy day with pouring rain and mist that blocks one's vision, Helen later envisions a day more congenial to a place which promises a "new world, a new life" (118): there is plenty of sunlight, and the spring air smells of "good earth" (118).

It is quite obvious that Helen's recollections are far from being a reliable source of information. Although in her visions she seems to revisit the place of her childhood, the imaginary construct of that place does not at all come close to the place which once existed. Helen's visions of her childhood home are so distorted by psychological conflicts and anxieties that one cannot tell to what extent they are based on factual evidence. But obviously Oates is not interested in having her protagonist revisit the place of her childhood in the more traditional terms of a character's dual confrontation with both present day reality and the recollections it evokes. In Oates's "By the River" such a confrontation with reality never occurs. Helen's attempts to return to her childhood home happen to be visions only, and they are only foregrounded against other visions of the past, usually contradictory ones.

To complicate things even more, the reader is not only confronted with recollections which contradict each other once they are compared, but with recollections which in themselves are totally amorphous. The passage quoted above offers a neat illustration of the shifting significations within one and the same moment of vision. As we can see, Helen's image of the past is tainted by her own emotional turmoil as well as by her recollection of her parents' disappointment. Thus, she initially visualizes the farmhouse the family moves into as a shabby run-down place. Yet Helen soon succeeds in eliminating all disturbing aspects of her vision, and the house

is then revisualized in Edenic terms: it is turned into a *locus amoenus*, the site of a "new world, a new life." Reality is charged with myth; the move to the countryside is transformed into an act of regaining paradise, in spite of the disturbing presence of "secret things" which threaten to destroy it. Yet Helen's initial evocation of the past also shows that the family's dreams would not stand the test of time. Her father would soon detect that his hopes would be betrayed because the farm did not yield the profit he had expected.

For Helen, the move to the new home marks an even more decisive event: as she has no recollection of her life before her arrival in Eden County, the move coincides with her becoming conscious of the ephemerality of human life. The text explicitly defines the moment of transition: "She could not remember the city and the house they had lived in there, but she had been old enough to sense the simplicity of the country and the eagerness of her parents, and then the angry perplexity that had followed" (118). With this suddenly gained awareness of time, Helen's arrival in Eden County symbolically represents her expulsion from the paradise of childhood and the subsequent fall into the knowledge of the temporality of one's existence. Helen has tried to repress this knowledge for a long time, but now—as she drives home with her father—it keeps invading her consciousness with increasing force. She is extremely irritated when she observes that her mind returns, again and again, to the past and to images of death: "Why," she asks herself, "did her mind push her into the past so often these days?—she only twenty-two [. . .] and going to begin a new life" (119). Early on in the narrative, while she meditates on the rumors that must have spread about her running off with a stranger, she sees the betrayal of her own family and her adultery as a mortal sin and a "disease that is going to be fatal" (113). Yet, Helen's initial associative toying with the notion of mortal sin and the subsequent idea of her own death soon allows more prominent subconscious death wishes to come to the fore:

> [. . .] there were so many diseases and only one way out of the world, only one death and so many ways to get to it. They were like doors, Helen thought dreamily. You walked down a hallway like those in movies, in huge wealthy homes, crystal chandeliers and marble floors and . . . great sweeping lawns . . . and doors all along those hallways; if you picked the wrong door you had to go through it. (113)

Helen successfully interrupts this grim train of thought, but moments later, when she recalls the conversation she had with her father on the phone the night before, her mind once more leads her back to visions of her own death:

> Listening to her father, she had felt *for the first time since she had run away* and left them all behind [. . .] that she had perhaps died and only imagined she was running away. Nobody here trusted the city; it was too big. Helen had wanted to go there all her life, not being afraid of anything, and so she had gone, and was coming back [to the country]; but it was an odd feeling, this dreamy ghostliness, as if she were really dead and coming back in a form that only looked like herself. (114; italics mine)

In a paradoxical inversion of the common significance of the biblical fall, Helen's decision to leave her rural paradise in Eden County for the big city is not at all visualized in terms of man's expulsion from paradise, but rather as an act of escape. As for Helen, Eden represents, first and foremost, the knowledge of man's mortality; it is only once she intends to return to Eden that her personal obsession with death is rekindled: "she had felt for the first time since she had run away [. . .] that she had perhaps died" (114). Given this private reconceptualization of Eden and the subsequent conflict with the signification Eden has acquired in the public domain, it is no wonder that Helen is unable to understand her actions, and especially the motivation that has brought her back home.

Like many other stories and novels by Joyce Carol Oates, "By the River" exemplifies the writer's keen interest in analyzing and criticizing people's constantly being shaped by their culture's dominant ideologies, in the context of American culture, for instance, by the ubiquitous belief in the possibility of man's return to Eden. When, in her 1973 essay "The Myth of the Isolated Artist" Oates claims that all her books have been "formalized, complex propositions about the nature of personality and its relationship to a specific culture,"[8] she voices the contention that character analysis must focus on the cultural factors which determine personality regardless of the individual's intentions. Thus, Helen's seemingly unmotivated return to Eden County is motivated to a large extent by cultural factors which are beyond her own cognition and control. Helen cannot free herself from the pervasive identification of home with

Eden, a concept which is deeply ingrained in the culture she has grown up in. This very concept also informed her parents' pastoral dream of a new life in Eden County, a life in which one's vision of self-realization could become a reality. Consequently, this concept also led to the complete frustration of their hopes once they found out that something was "wrong" with the farm. As a young child Helen was already aware of the pervasiveness of her parents' Edenic dream and also of the "eagerness" with which they pursued it and, finally, the "angry perplexity that had followed" (118) when her parents recognized that their dream would not come true.

In Helen's case the relationship between the fundamental beliefs of her culture and her own vision is charged with irreconcilable conflicts. As her culture defines the achievement of one's individual paradise in terms of economic success (e.g. the possession of a beautiful mansion in a pastoral setting), Helen cannot ascribe Edenic qualities to her childhood home. Although she temporarily succeeds, as we have seen, in transforming her rather "crowded and shabby" (118) new home into the *Gone With the Wind*-image of a beautiful mansion with curtains "ballooning" in a soft breeze, she cannot control the process of transformation for long. As the Eden of her own childhood was constantly threatened and belittled by the dictates of the far more glorious images of success and self-realization which her culture promotes, Helen is forced—in an act of psychological self-defense—to
transform the movie image of a woman's domestic paradise, i.e. the huge mansion of rich plantation owners, into a symbol of the omnipresence of death.

> [. . . there was] only one death and so many ways to get to it. They were like doors, Helen thought dreamily. You walked down a hallway like those in movies, in huge wealthy homes [. . .]; if you picked the wrong door you had to go through it. (113)

Because of her psychological disposition, Helen is not able to activate the positive connotations often associated with images of transition in Western culture; for her the doors of these mansions' marble hallways are no *portae coeli* through which she might step into the realm of an anticipated celestial

paradise,[9] but doors which represent the threatening transition into the uncertainty of a hereafter.[10]

Helen's imaginary reconstructions of her childhood home are burdened with additional, extremely ambiguous associations. As her father drives along and passes pastures and fields that once belonged to her parents' farm, Helen is suddenly confronted with a "vision [which] pleased and confused her" (123) at the same time, a recollection charged with stark and obtrusive symbolism:

> She remembered going out to the farthest field with water for [her father], before he had given up that part of the farm. And he would take the jug from her and lift it to his lips and it would seem to Helen, the sweet child Helen standing in the dusty corn, that the water flowed into her magnificent father and enlivened him as if it were secret blood of her own she had given him. (123)

Helen's vision of self-sacrifice marks a decisive turn in the course of the narrative. It occurs at the end of her desperate effort to find out what is wrong with her father and what motivates the unfamiliar taciturnity he has shown since they met. Moments later, her father would stop the car at a turn of the Eden River and begin his long confession-like attempt to make sense of his own life, and to explain what has sustained his life-long dream of an earthly paradise. The reader soon understands that Helen's vision of her imaginary self-sacrifice is but the expression of the obsessive expectations which her father and, by implication, her entire culture have projected onto her. Her father's (American) dream of an existence in God's second paradise has been, however, perverted from the very beginning. As this dream was transformed into a dream of mere economic success,[11] the obsessive pursuit of it could only wreak havoc on the family. Indeed, the psychodynamics of fear and guilt which the father's dream generates bring about cruel results: as heirs and executors of a dream which the father himself is unable to realize, the children, and especially Helen, become victims of expectations they also cannot possibly fulfill. As we have already seen, her father's hope that she would once live "in one of them big houses" (125) builds up such psychological pressure in Helen that she can visualize this 'dream' only in terms of a house with innumerable doors which may all lead her to destruction and death.

Helen's return home is indeed motivated by the pervasiveness of a dream which was deeply inscribed into her mind on the day the family moved to the new farm in Eden County. The mental images with which Helen responds to the gradual perversion and destruction of this dream portray her as a helpless victim. She has been paralyzed by this dream, and as she feels guilty of having betrayed her father's expectations, she now feels forced to revitalize the dream by sacrificing her own life. Helen is, however, not able to decipher the significance of the vision of her father's unholy communion. Nevertheless, her father's drinking from a chalice which is filled with her own blood is but a visionary anticipation of the sacrificial ritual with which her father finally tries to reaffirm the validity of a dream he cannot give up. Helen is never able to comprehend the real motives that have made her come back; even moments before she is literally executed on her father's altar of social respectability, she is still completely left in the dark: "I came back because . . . because . . .," she stammers, incapable of filling in the reason. On the banks of the Eden River, Helen's father turns into a modern day Abraham who is willing to affirm his belief by sacrificing his child. Yet Helen is not a modern world Isaac: she is not rescued, nor is her father saved from blindly pursuing a dream that has been wrong from the start. Helen's life is not saved by the workings of a divine justice. Instead, it is spilled by the strange mechanics of a predestined fate:

> And she shredded the weed in her cold fingers, but no words came to her. She watched the weed-fragments fall. No words came to her, her mind had turned hollow and cold, she had come too far down to this river bank but it was not a mistake any more than the way the river kept moving was a mistake; it just happened.
>
> Her father got slowly to his feet and she saw in his hand a knife she had been seeing all her life. Her eyes seized upon it and her mind tried to remember: where had she seen it last, whose was it, her father's or her brother's? He came to her and touched her shoulder as if waking her, and they looked at each other, Helen so terrified by now that she was no longer afraid but only curious with the mute marblelike curiosity of a child [. . .]. (127-28)

In spite of the fact that Helen is strangely preoccupied with the question of whose knife she is going to be killed with, the formulation "and she saw in his hand a knife she had been seeing all her life" is crucial to an

understanding of the ending of "By the River." Helen, one may argue, only comes back to fulfill her fate and to be sacrificed by her father. Although she does not consciously know what fate is in store for her, her visions of home have already defined the path she must finally take back into the heart of Eden. At its center she would find the tree of knowledge: Helen's paradise is defined by the knowledge of the temporality of human existence, and thus the only vision she can seek to realize is that of her passing through one of the doors of the big house which she never regarded as home.

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NOTES

[1]Joyce Carol Oates, *With Shuddering Fall* (New York: Vanguard, 1964) 117.

[2]Cf., among others, Oates's novels *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), *Childwold* (1976), *Son of the Morning* (1978), *Bellefleur* (1980), *Marya: A Life* (1986) and *You Must Remember This* (1987), and her short story collections *By the North Gate* (1963), *Upon the Sweeping Flood* (1966) and *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972).

[3]Many of Joyce Carol Oates's novels and short stories are autobiographical, at least to the extent that their protagonists' "half-conscious and often despairing quest for [their] own elusive sel[ves]" reflects the "inner kernel of emotion" of the author's own quest for identity. Cf. the preface to *Marya: A Life* (1986), where Oates explicitly comments on the autobiographical basis of her novel: "*Marya: A Life* will very likely remain the most 'personal' of my novels (along with the later novel *You Must Remember This*), though it is not, in the strictest sense, autobiographical. [. . .] *Marya* was an extremely difficult novel to write, perhaps, because it is both 'personal' and 'fictional.' Many of Marya's thoughts and impressions parallel my own at her approximate age but the circumstances that provoke them have been altered, as have most of the characters. To the author, Marya's mixture of intimacy and strangeness suggests a dream in which the domestic features of one's life appear side by side with unrecognizable elements; yet, evidently, all constitute a pattern. What is most autobiographical about the novel is its inner kernel of emotion—Marya's half-conscious and often despairing quest for her own elusive self."

[4]*New York Times Magazine*, 19 March 1989, 108. In her meditations on the "genesis" of art, Oates points out many occasions in which a work of art originated in an autobiographical impulse. In her essay "Beginnings," for instance, she comments somewhat apologetically on the autobiographical impulse: "It remains a surprising

(and disturbing) fact to many literary observers that writers should, upon occasion, write so directly from life, that they should 'cannibalize' and even 'vampirize' their own experiences. But this species of creation is surely inevitable? entirely natural? The artist is driven by passion; and passion most powerfully derives from our own experiences and memories." Cf. Oates, *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* (New York: Dutton, 1988) 6.

[5]"Transformation of Self: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *The Ohio Review* (Autumn 1973): 50-61; repr. in *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Lee Milazzo (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989) 48. See also Oates's programmatic statement in her introduction to *Scenes from American Life: Contemporary Short Fiction* (New York: Vanguard, 1973) vii: "All art is autobiographical. It is the record of an artist's psychic experience, his attempt to explain something to himself: and in the process of explaining it to himself, he explains it to others."

[6]Indeed, many characters in Oates's novels and short stories are deeply traumatized by their failure to live up to the quintessentially American notion of individual self-realization. Obviously Oates, like many of her fellow-Americans, regards self-realization as one of the chief moral obligations and patriotic duties the individual has to fulfill. In her preface to *Bellefleur* (New York: Dutton, 1980), Oates comments on the notion of self-realization as a dominant element in America's national ideology: "One by one the Bellefleur children free themselves of their family's curse (or blessing); one by one they disappear into America, to define themselves for themselves. [. . .] Theirs is the privilege of youth; and the 'America' of my imagination, despite the incursions of recent decades, is a nation still characterized by youth. Our past may weigh heavily upon us but it cannot contain us, let alone shape our future. America is a tale still being told—in many voices—and nowhere near its conclusion." To some extent, Oates's celebration of the optimistic "spirit of America" which encompasses the entire repertoire of patriotic encomia may be seen, however, as the result of a strategy the writer used in order to defend herself against critics who had claimed that her novels and stories distorted America into a sheer pandemonium of perversion and violence which had nothing to do with reality.

[7]The story was published in 1968 in the magazine *December*. It was, however, not widely circulated until it was included in Oates' third collection of short stories *Marriages and Infidelities* (New York: Vanguard, 1972) 112-28; all subsequent quotations (with page references added in brackets) follow the text of this collection.

[8]"The Myth of the Isolated Artist," *Psychology Today* (May 1973): 75.

[9]The traditional implications of the symbol of the door are wide-ranging. For symbols of transition to an edenic existence see, for instance, biblical references in Ez 14:1 ff. and Ps 87:2. Cf. esp. Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, 3rd. ed., (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1981) s.v. "door" and "gate."

[10]In Oates's own symbolic 'universe,' the image of the door tends to be closely related to imminent destruction and death. In her essay "Wonderlands" she discusses the symbolic significance of door images in texts by Robert Louis Stevenson, Franz Kafka, Frances Hodgson Burnett, and H.G. Wells. Yet Oates's "wonderland" cannot be found—as one might assume—in the "Edenic garden hidden behind a door in a wall" in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, but in the irresistibly attractive and at the same time horrifying garden which is hidden behind a door in H. G. Wells's 1911 tale "The Door

in the Wall." Oates seems to be fascinated by Wells's "fin-de-siècle sentiments of an extremely pessimistic sort since, after all, the door in the wall is a doorway to death. The mysterious regenerating powers of the secret garden touch, it seems, only children, in the 'golden hours' of life; forever afterward they are inaccessible. Or they return in a terrifying guise, as impulses that lead to disintegration and death." Cf. "Wonderlands," *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities* 103-04; originally published in *The Georgia Review* (Spring 1985).

[11]As the story explicitly states, Helen's father only wanted to overcome his complex of social inferiority by proving to himself and the world that they were respectable people, and that although they were poor they "weren't hillbillies": "I prayed to God to bring them [i.e. his snobbish neighbors] down to me so they could see me, my children as good as theirs [. . .]. I wanted to come into their world even if it had to be on the bottom of it, just so long as they gave me a name . . ." (125).