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**"The Premonition"**  
**by Joyce Carol Oates**

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## Preface

Writing an academic paper about a piece of fiction which is only a few years old is always an interesting challenge. Most of the time, the available secondary texts about the author and his or her oeuvre are older than the work itself, and thus only of limited reliability. Or there simply are no secondary texts.

Fortunately, my topic was to write about Joyce Carol Oates, who is one of the most important modern literary authors in the United States, and one of the most widely known and read at that. Thus, when it became clear that I would soon have exhausted the resources of our libraries, I decided to take my chances with the Internet - to use a medium of the nineties for an author of the nineties. That way, I discovered the full range of Joyce Carol Oates's celebrity as a writer: I came across Randy Souther's *Celestial Timepiece*, which is a whole website about Oates

(<http://storm.usfca.edu/~southern/jco.html>). It proved to be the most valuable source I found for my paper, linking up to critical articles by and about Oates, a brand-new biography, pictures, maps, publication indexes, and a lot more. It provided me with many of my secondary texts, and a detailed picture of Joyce Carol Oates's works and ideas as a background for my personal analysis of "The Premonition". As the articles were unavailable in the form of their original publication, page indications of quotes ('Netpg.') refer to the Internet print copies. Page indications in brackets without further specification refer automatically to the primary source of "The Premonition".

However, except for book reviews, there was nowhere anything to be found on "The Premonition" itself (Greg Johnson's study of Oates's short fiction was helpful, yet appeared before the publication of *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*). The analysis is therefore based on my own ideas, together with an application of some short story theories (c.f. quotes and bibliography), a study of general principles underlying Oates's fiction, and a tentative stylistic analysis ("The Premonition" abounds with detail; it would take a separate paper to do a complete stylistic study).

The language standard I use is General American.

Many thanks to Randy Souther from the University of San Francisco, who helped me out with two very important articles; to Nicole Plett at Princeton and to Diane Harris with *USA Today* whom I contacted via e-mail; and to my friend Sabine Pöschel, who was my connection to the library of the English department at the University of Salzburg.

Barbara Soukup

## JOYCE CAROL OATES<sup>1</sup>

I started writing when I was very small. And I was drawing before I could write actually. So I was already trying to tell stories. I was drawing chickens and cats and creatures on the farm. And I think basically I just kept on going.

(Joyce Carol Oates)<sup>2</sup>

Today, Joyce Carol Oates ranks among the most distinguished writers of the United States, and the winner of numerous prizes (including multiple O. Henry Awards and the National Book Award).

Born in 1938, towards the end of the Great Depression, in Lockport, New York State, she was raised in the working-class environment of her grandparents' farm in Millersport, NY, where she later also attended a one-room schoolhouse in the elementary grades. Her early literary ambitions became serious business when she received the gift of a typewriter at the age of fourteen, setting herself to train consciously, as she says, writing "novel after novel" (Plett, I, Netpg. 4) through high school and college. She studied at Syracuse University, NY (with a major in English and a minor in philosophy), where she frequently published in the university's literary magazine. In 1959 her writing career was "officially" launched when she won the widely coveted *Mademoiselle* fiction contest. After receiving her B.A. degree at the top of her class in 1960, she transferred to the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, for an M.A. in English. There she met and soon afterwards married Raymond Joseph Smith; they moved to Texas where she set to work on her first short story collection *By The North Gate*. In 1962 the couple relocated to Detroit, where Joyce Carol Oates taught English at the university. She has often stated that the city in itself had an important impact on her writing: "[...] Detroit, my 'great' subject; made me the person I am, consequently the writer I am - for better or worse." (CA, 317), and elsewhere, To live, [...] as I did, in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1960s [...] was to find myself not only provided with but hardly able to ignore the immediacy of drama, social conflict, tragedy, tragi-comedy... the opportunity of realizing

firsthand a virtual allegory of American experience. (Oates, "American Literary Culture", Netpg. 6)

From 1968 onwards, Joyce Carol Oates taught 'just across the river' at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, until she accepted a position of professor and writer in residence at Princeton University, NJ. She continues to teach there in the university's creative writing program, and to publish at the amazing rate of at least two books per year.

In fact, Joyce Carol Oates's prolificacy as a writer is almost proverbial. The count of her novels will soon reach the number thirty, the total of her work in various genres allegedly filling more than sixty volumes. Indeed, as novelist John Barth once remarked, Oates writes "all over the aesthetical map"<sup>3</sup>, including, in addition to her novels (*them, Bellefleur, Black Water*, etc.) and hundreds of short stories, drama, poetry, non-fiction (her essay "On Boxing" once even earned her the job of a sports commentator), critical works (*(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities*), newspaper articles, and, recently, even a libretto (for John Duffy's opera adaptation of her novel *Black Water*). She is the editor of various anthologies (of Kafka stories, of *The Essential Dickinson*, of *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, of the forthcoming *Telling Stories: An Anthology for Writers*), and, together with her husband, of the literary magazine *Ontario Review*. In 1987 she started a 'secondary' career as a mystery writer under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith.

This enormous productivity has frequently incited critics to accuse her of 'churning out' books in an automated process without revision, but according to Greg Johnson, her biographer, such charges can be easily refuted with the evidence found at the Joyce Carol Oates archive at Syracuse University, which contains thousands of pages of drafts and careful revisions, the testimony of a meticulous and deliberate writing process. Joyce Carol Oates herself says that she does not feel exceedingly productive, that she is no workaholic, also because she loves her work so much that she cannot consider it 'work' at all, but her life's commitment.<sup>4</sup>

There are other myths about her, like her being withdrawn and humorless, austere, forbidding, and unapproachable as a person. Greg Johnson

convincingly refutes these as misconceptions, drawing from personal experience.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he talks about a paradoxical quality in Oates's existence that has struck many commentators, the same as Plett, who asks, "By what means, we all wonder, does such a delicate, lightweight figure transform herself into an American literary heavyweight? How can this delicate face framed in brown curls house such a dark - some would say brutal - imagination?" (Plett, I, Netpg. 1) Reading into Oates's often violence-infiltrated fiction, this seems hardly fathomable. The author herself might wish to reply, "The contrast between what we *know* of a writer from his or her work [...] and what we are forced to confront in the irrefutable flesh [...] is nearly always disorienting." (Oates, *(Woman) Writer*, 48). Or, with Isaac Dinesen, "Not by the face shall man be known, but by the mask." (Oates, *(Woman) Writer*, 50)

And what a multi-faceted mask to have, the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates.

## THE PREMONITION

The week before Christmas, Whitney Paxton is haunted by a premonition. Knowing about his elder brother Quinn's renewed alcohol problem and his frequently violent temper, Whitney fears that something dreadful may have happened to his sister-in-law, Ellen, and her daughters, Molly and Trish. He drives across the city to check on the family, and what he finds at the house is, to his relief, three women that are very much alive but slightly overactive, packing up to leave, a kitchen full of tools and Christmas parcels - and virtually no trace of his brother. Quinn is said to have left on business. But the truth showing through is that he has been murdered and his corpse disposed of in the midst of cheerful Christmas preparations...

"The Premonition" was originally published in *Playboy* magazine in 1992;<sup>6</sup>

two years later, it was featured in Joyce Carol Oates's short story collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, where it is now frequently counted among the very best of the volume.

The *Haunted*-collection in general once more manifests Joyce Carol Oates's interest in the gothic and grotesque tradition that has produced such successful novels as *Bellefleur* (1980) and *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982); and it features allusions to the heritage of such great writers of the gothic as Edgar Allen Poe<sup>7</sup> and Henry James<sup>8</sup>. The grotesque in particular is the uniting theme under which the sixteen stories, including "The Premonition", are subsumed: "One might define it, in fact, as the very antithesis of 'nice'," says Joyce Carol Oates in her "Afterword" to the collection.<sup>9</sup> "The Premonition" is certainly not 'nice': the absurd discrepancy between the seemingly harmless surface account and the subversive murder tale make it a unique piece of grotesque writing.

Many critics have expressed the opinion that Joyce Carol Oates is at her finest when writing in the genre of the short story. It is said that this concentrated form, demanding technical control and skillful mastering of language and effects, serves her style and subject matter best, "for the extended dialogue, minute detail, and violent action which [may] irritate the reader after hundreds of pages are wonderfully appropriate in short fiction."<sup>10</sup> Oates herself has always had a special regard for the short story form, as she indicates on numerous occasions: "Unlike most I worked my way back to, or into the short story as a prose work complete in itself." (Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 131), "I like the freedom and promise of the form." (Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 3) and elsewhere, "The short story [is] a form ideally suited to the expression of the imagination." (Oates, *American Short Stories*, 3)

It will be interesting to look at what exactly the author Joyce Carol Oates understands a short story to be; how she marks out the concept for her personal creative use. Theoretic remarks of hers show that she is actually very reluctant to delimit the genre by means of prescriptive boundaries ("the short story, as it is one of the manifestations of the human spirit, simply cannot be defined." (Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 134); however, as the editor of

the 1992 *Oxford Book of American Short Stories*, she makes the following concession:

My personal definition of the form is that it represents a concentration of imagination, and not an expansion; it is no more than 10,000 words; and [...] it achieves closure - meaning that, when it ends, the attentive reader understand [sic] why.

That is to say, the short story is a prose piece that is not a mere concatenation of events, [...] but an intensification of meaning by way of events. Its 'plot' may be wholly interior, seemingly static [...]. Its resolution need not be a formally articulated statement, [...] but it signals a tangible change of some sort; a distinct shift in consciousness; a deepening of insight. [...]

In addition to these qualities, most short stories (but hardly all) are restricted in time and place; concentrate upon a very small number of characters; and move toward a single ascending dramatic scene or revelation. All are generated by conflict.

(Oates, "American Short Stories", 7-8)

This conception can be traced in "The Premonition" (which dates from about the same epoch). The story is only an estimated 6,500 words; its meaning is intensified and concentrated by way of events in the service of a unified underlying message crystallizing increasingly in the progressing story; its ending is prepared. There are not many characters (five or six relevant ones),<sup>11</sup> time and place are restricted (mainly to one evening and Quinn's house), and a movement towards a single revelation (for the reader) is apparent. Conflict is in fact the source of all events.

A detailed analysis of the story will follow these preliminary remarks.

## 1. Structure



In the genre of the short story, where the text is generally more concise and concentrated as in the novel,<sup>12</sup> the 'concert' of single features and aspects forming the unitary whole, creating the meaning, becomes particularly obvious. Individual features can be immediately related to the effect they create. Maybe this is why the short story is a traditional area of experimentation - its 'microcosm' allowing constellations of elements which would be impracticable or unreadable when brought to the larger scale of the novel.

Structure is one of the variable factors to explore in a short story. In the case of "The Premonition", it involves a segmentation into two main parts (172-177; 177-187). This seems an arguable point, as there are further divisions in the second half of the story; but the incision occurring when the door to the house is opened is still the most decisive. The functions assigned to the part before and the one afterwards are markedly different, as shall be seen. The subdivision of the second part operates on another level altogether. It is therefore useful to assume a twofold overall segmentation in the analysis (rather than a sixfold), as this does the most justice to the dynamic of the story, and achieves the best balance.

The first part, then, (172-177), functions essentially as an opening sequence to the later unravelling action; it establishes the necessary context, the text-immanent 'schema', which, in analogy to the linguistic conception, shall be defined as the cognitive construct necessary for the organization of further information.<sup>13</sup>

The narrative present is established around the first character presented, Whitney Paxton. The scene is set on a Thursday before Christmas, at dusk, as Whitney drives across the city, himself driven by his premonitions. No further indications as to absolute time setting are included. In the following first paragraphs, the most important facts are given about how he got there; particulars about his brother Quinn - his renewed drinking problem, his tendency to use violence as in the fact that he beats his wife and children, his dangerousness - are established. This leads to a brief personal of Quinn

and a recapitulation of the steps leading to Whitney's evening 'excursion'. By and by, the Paxton family and their Christmas rituals are introduced. The family is described as a "large, gregarious, but close-knit clan" (176) with little sympathy for troublemakers.

There is seemingly quite a lot of information the reader needs to be filled in on. As the number of acting characters is reduced to a single one - Whitney - there are special means employed to introduce the necessary intelligence in the text. The technique applied is a faithful rendition of Whitney's thoughts and reflections, which also provides for the installation of potent illustrative flashbacks. There are two kinds: the more recent ones refer to the same day or the day before (e.g. the various phonecalls 172-173), and are above all reportive of the immediate past that was the situative trigger for Whitney's driving out. The second kind are two mental flashbacks that reach farther back in time; the first of which, "Quinn, last Fourth of July" (175), takes in fact the form of a vivid image flashing to Whitney's mind - and a terrifying one, of his brother in a blood-smeared apron pointing his carving-knife at Whitney at the barbecue. This vision is conjured up in vague association by Whitney's fear for Ellen and the girls, and it serves a very distinct underlying purpose, which is to give, for the benefit of the reader, an impression of Quinn himself through his behavior, and the effect he produces on people, particularly on his brother.

The second of these flashbacks into the remoter past is the recollection of Ellen's "bid for freedom" two years before (176). It further illustrates the deep trouble Quinn's marriage is in, his attitude towards his brother and the tension in their relationship, Quinn's temper, and a divorce solution that was never carried through, because after all, to Ellen "the man [Quinn] was her life" (176) (it seems to be Whitney who tells us so).

In the overall view, there seems to be very little advancing action in this first part, although the information is conveyed at a considerable pace due to the choice of the reporting mode (which will be discussed later on). Whitney arrives at his brother's house, rings the doorbell more than once, and waits in a very anxious state of mind until Ellen arrives to open up. However, the narrative is structured in a way that by the time she does so,

the reader is updated on all important information he will need to make sense of the further progress of the story - the context is successfully established and all preparations have been made.

Thus the second part begins. As has been said before, this section is marked by a considerable change in function and also in technique<sup>14</sup>. The narrative shifts to a predomination of dialogue as Whitney now enters the 'lion's den'; but Quinn is nowhere to be seen - instead, there is a warm welcome from Ellen, and later from the daughters Molly and Trish.

The second part is subdivided into five sections set off from each other optically by spacing. In the overall sequence of these sections, Whitney more and more penetrates into the core of the house and of events, starting from the entrance (section 1, 177-180), proceeding to the kitchen (section 2, 180-183), where Whitney's mind (and the story) virtually rests some time on the central elements of the parcels and tools (section 3, 184-185), until he enters the guest bathroom (section 4, 185), and is eventually accompanied back to the front door to take leave (section 5, 186-187).

In a parallel dynamic to this penetration of the house, the second part of the story now, after the building-up of the first part, conducts the reader to the discovery of the underlying, the 'true' meaning of "The Premonition" in a noticeable ascension of scenes relating to Joyce Carol Oates's principles of technique in the short story.<sup>15</sup> The lines read that Whitney is greeted by his sister-in-law, who is quite obviously in a state of high nervous agitation and bears bruises in her face. Being led to the kitchen, he remarks that there are a boxes and cartons in the hall - obvious signs of some travel preparations. In the kitchen, a curious 'female' atmosphere reigns and his nieces are at work, scrubbing away; they, too are marked with bruises in their faces. The women offer Whitney some coffee and light explanations when they discuss his brother's absence and the impending trip abroad. Whitney notices a heap of neat Christmas packages in the kitchen and an assortment of tools on the floor. He uses the guest.bathroom, where a weird smell makes him feel sick, and just before he leaves he receives his own Christmas present in a lot of cheerful fuss.

What reads *between* the lines of this account is quite another thing - it is a gruesome murder story. Whitney's premonition has been fulfilled, only in a way he does not suspect; the essence being, as mentioned before, that Ellen and her daughters have killed Quinn, that they have cut up his corpse into pieces and disposed of those by wrapping them up nicely as Christmas presents for the family. The motive crystallizing is that he has once more severely beaten them, and that they have also found out about his betrayal: little Trish's blunder about the "Sea Shell Islands" (182) shows that the family know for a fact what Whitney had heard as a rumor.

The underlying meaning builds up in this half of the story as the reader adds up the circumstantial evidence presented piece by piece through Whitney's blank observations. But Whitney, being too fixed on the fact that any possible danger may solely emanate from Quinn and classifying the women as harmless, fails to make the necessary connections. He wonders enough about the rather peculiar behavior of the women, but the travel preparations may easily be used to account for this. Even at the point where the story ascends to a sort of climax when Whitney's subconscious adds up the evidence as well as the reader and flashes the image of the chicken-killing through his mind in response to the Proustian trigger of the "cloying, slightly rancid odor, as of blood" (185), there is a practical explanation at hand, which has been served up before by Molly (deliberately or by coincidence?)- that the smell has to do with menstruation, therefore with a topic Whitney would never touch upon. The strong analogy of the chicken-dressing image,<sup>16</sup> serving as a last and more than broad hint to the reader at this point, suggesting vividly and sickeningly what must have happened to Quinn, is lost on Whitney, who fails to interpret it correctly:

With a thrill of repugnance, he wondered now, if the blood-heavy odor had to do after all with menstruation.

His cheeks burned. He didn't want to know, really.

Some secrets are best kept by females, among females. Yes?

(185)

He leaves, with his newly received Christmas present. The ending is here all the more remarkable as it constitutes a sort of anti-climax, a counteracting of a conventional short story principle that the actual punch-line occurs at the very end. In "The Premonition", *nothing* happens in the finale, the murder is not discovered other than to the reader. But maybe this is in itself an ironic punch-line...

The climactic chicken-image scene constitutes one of the two flashbacks featuring quite prominently in this second part of the narrative. The other instance is when the bruises he sees on the children trigger off in Whitney's mind the recollection of an incident years before when Quinn had slapped his young wife in front of the family and guests (183). Quinn's innate violence is again vividly recalled to mind.

The second part of "The Premonition" exceeds the first one not only in length, but also in general prominence, as it is the one that actually constructs the grim story. Still, its effectiveness vitally depends on the setup created in the first section for the meaning to be realized. The preparation does 'half the work' already. Just how the mechanisms work in the story to convey the intended message shall be examined further on in this study.

## 2. Setting

There is essentially one characteristic setting established in "The Premonition": it is the house where Quinn and his family live. Whitney is 'conducted' there in part one, and part two is entirely set in it. But despite the sinister prospects that Whitney - and the reader - feel awaiting them, the classical gothic foreboding in the aspect of the house is missing. The premonition does not manifest itself in horror, as in the example of Poe's House of Usher, but remains at a subtler, more emotional level. Whitney's sentiment that he is trespassing, which comes over him every time he visits, certainly has to do with his personal 'underdog' relationship to his brother,

and with the distinct aura of prosperity emanating from the estate, which he just does not fit in; however, no overt grimness or ugliness is employed to shock the onlooker: that the location should still be intimidating despite its apparent harmlessness is a sheer irony.

The room in the house that features most prominently is the kitchen. Traditionally, a kitchen is the 'heart' of a habitation, promising a warm hearth, a cozy atmosphere of women's hustle and bustle, and various nourishing delights. In "The Premonition", these connotations are deliberately employed. Whitney intrudes into what seems at first glance a stereotypical female sanctum, filled with a "distinctly female atmosphere", but also an "undercurrent of hysteria" (181). On the surface, quite conventional activities are going on: Christmas preparations are in full course, with the 'traditional' cleaning and scrubbing, the room is very warm, and even a fittingly cloying smell hangs in the air. There is nothing exceptional, on the whole, if the common stereotypes are taken for granted; and yet, how gruesome does the picture become if reset in accord with the growing terrible suspicions. The whole concept of 'kitchen' is deliberately perverted; what is peaceful and cozy on the surface is distorted to become grotesque: the season-cleaning is in reality a wiping out of murderous tracks, the smell ardently dissipated by the fan is produced by human blood. In this new context, even the luxuriously wrapped Christmas presents seem phony - after all, what could be a more fitting way to dispose of a despised husband's limbs than to return them to the loving family... The spotless bathroom offers a last chance of revelation, yet the horror surfaces to the reader only; Whitney is too involved and preoccupied with the aftermath of his premonition to draw the right conclusions and to see his ideal "three benign Fates" (185) in their kingdom uncovered to be three witches over their cauldron.

The careful elaboration of such a setting within the story makes the narrative self-sufficient enough not to rely on larger frameworks to supply a background. Thus, it cannot be surprising that no space whatsoever is 'wasted' on a distinct description of the global setting of the story. There can be no doubt about the place being somewhere in the United States (indications of Fourth of July celebrations and the music "young

Americans" love (181) are proof enough). Further locating of the setting may be attempted in analogy to Joyce Carol Oates's autobiographical history and habitual preferences, which both would point to a New England background for "The Premonition". Certain climatic conditions (the cold and prospects of snow) would at least not contradict such a supposition.

The global time setting is similarly evasive. The text-immanent scheme is quite carefully outlined, starting at dusk, precisely on the Thursday before Christmas (which is to be on the next Wednesday); and the immediate action takes place probably within a couple of hours.

What is much more difficult to determine is first of all the point in time *from* which "The Premonition" is told. There *are* indications of an 'afterwards': "Then, vastly relieved, he saw Ellen approaching the door - *was* it Ellen? There appeared to be something wrong with her - this was Whitney's initial, though confused impression, which he would recall long afterward [...]" (177); "The kitchen was so brightly lit, the atmosphere so charged, gay, frenetic, Whitney halfway thought he'd stepped into a celebration of some kind. This too he would remember, afterward." (180) These are instances of impressions that directly relate to what the reader learns has really happened, the murder. It is very likely, then, that the story is told at a point of time where Whitney, too, has long realized what Ellen and the girls were up to on the day of his visit, at a point when, while the women have long vanished to "Paris. Rome. London. Madrid." (182), the truth has come out, probably by means of the Christmas presents containing Quinn's body parts.

Secondly, what is difficult or even impossible to determine on a larger time scale, is any external temporal context or frame of reference. A historical-chronological placement of "The Premonition" is avoided. On the whole, anything in the range of the last twenty years or so seems reasonable as the period, although the given cultural features this suggestion is based on, (especially commodities like indoor pools, sauna, Volvo cars, or simply Diet Cokes and baseball caps) are less easily assigned to a particular era in American culture than they might be in any European one.

The essence of the matter is that such assigning to particular times and places would only seriously diminish the quality of timelessness which "The Premonition" certainly possesses to a great degree. The very universality of the story is part of what makes it so outstanding, and what art, at any rate, is all about.

### 3. Characters and Relationships, Perspective (Part I)<sup>17</sup>

"The Premonition" is quite a special case of a short story, as has already been demonstrated. Meaning is not presented on the proverbial silver tray, but needs to be extracted from underneath the actual account. Characterization as well is by no means a straightforward and one-dimensional matter in the story.

The first character to be introduced is Whitney Paxton, a thirty-four-year-old 'unambitious' bachelor. His main role is that of the mediator in whose guise the author leads the reader through the story.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Whitney's character is an important factor in the overall 'equation' of "The Premonition"; his personality inevitably determines his outlook on the events and thus forcedly influences part of the reader's views, too.

The first part is entirely arranged around Whitney's trains of thought, with as little authorial interference as is just necessary to complete setting and context (samples of authorial 'stepping-in' include the brief personal on Quinn followed by the flashback on Whitney's actions that day, p.173; the description of "Whitewater Heights" and the house, pp.173-174; the description of the Paxtons' Christmas ritual, p.176; elements in the "bid for



freedom" scene, p.176).

The other way round, this 'perspectivity' means that by examining Whitney's viewpoint in relation to the events as the reader sees them, a light may be shed on his otherwise not specifically described character. On the whole, his actions and reactions piece together his personality in an indirect characterization.

It is established that Whitney is rather cautious (checking with phonecalls first before setting out), and the secluded type (he is a bachelor, he stays away from 'clan' gatherings if possible, and hasn't seen his nieces in six months before his visit) who was brought up not to interfere with anybody else's affairs - he tries not to stare at Trish's blackened eye and would not for the world ask about it (181-182); and later, when musing about everybody's sudden departure, his thoughts are "No, better not ask. For it was none of Whitney Paxton's business." (183). He is cowardish (in his rather exaggerated fear to get shot), especially so in confrontation with his brother, and would never speak up against him, being used to silently suffering insults, like his status as the family failure.

In an immediate comparison, Quinn and Whitney appear like antagonists, like antipodes even. There is no affection for each other in the brothers' relationship, just dominance mixed with mild contempt on the one, and subordination and fear, much stronger than respect, on the other side (it must be quite a strong premonition that would drive Whitney to his brother's house uninvited). Unlike Quinn, Whitney does not exert aggression; as the subdued younger sibling he is less physical, less extrovert and overpowering - less strong and thus, stereotypically, less 'virile' than Quinn.<sup>19</sup> Quinn seems to be the incarnation of a male human animal - his stature ("six feet three inches tall, two hundred pounds", p.175) his virile physicality and violent temper together with his self-righteousness and egotism evoke the image of the typical 'macho' man. In fact, his negative character traits, and practically none other are presented within the range of Whitney's perspective, border on the very stereotype of a man who *would* beat his wife and children - it is "a familiar story, and depressing" (172). This certainly appears to be a deliberate effect employed by the author.

There are on the whole rarely any occasions in the story where a more detailed description of Quinn exceeding mere outlines and impressions is given. His only appearances in person occur in Whitney's flashbacks, and indirectly in recollections and via the effect he has on other people. The point to make here is, then, that with the use of a very particular stereotype to back up the incomplete picture of his personality, Quinn's character receives enough substance to function in the story. Joyce Carol Oates deliberately 'taps' a frame of reference in the reader's mind that has been shaped by newspaper articles, TV reports and personal histories long ago; and, linking up Quinn with this schema, she does not *need* to be any more explicit in her description of him. There is certainly the artist's risk of making a very limited, one-dimensional figure out of Quinn. But the method is justified in its necessity for the setup of the story in the first part - by the time Whitney reaches the door of his brother's house, the reader should already be strongly apprehensive about what evil things may have happened there;<sup>20</sup> and such an uneasiness could not be conjured up in a more subtle and effective way than by bringing into play pictures of stereotypical, i.e. 'habitual' outcomes of family tragedies similar to the one in "The Premonition" (i.e. women being beaten into hospital or killed).

The tentative characterization of Ellen is likewise symptomatic of the way "The Premonition" works. In fact, her personality is not very tangible for the reader; although she appears 'in person' in the story, and in the flashbacks, too, the clues to her seem to be even more scarce than those leading to Quinn's character. The explanation for this lies once more in the angle from which the story is told - Whitney's. Judging from the little information conveyed about her character by him, the conclusion suggests itself that he is simply unable to 'read' her. He only sees her in relation to his brother; accordingly, she appears as the victimized and oppressed wife of a brute, at least in the first part, where Whitney's 'control' of the narrative is strongest. In the second part, when the underlying implications start to 'dawn' on the reader, this means that he or she necessarily begins to emancipate his or her view of Ellen's 'true' character from Whitney's. Ellen, the passive, intimidated victim of domestic abuse, trapped in a dysfunctional relationship, dropping divorce proceedings because she has "never loved anyone but Quinn, the man was her life"<sup>21</sup> (176), "unfailingly

glamorous" at the order of her husband (178), quickly "recovering her poise" after she has been publicly slapped (183), the "credulous wife" (180), "vulnerable" without her make-up (178) - this same Ellen possesses enough strength in the depths of her personality to commit a callous crime and cheerfully erase the traces. She falls out of the role Whitney attributes to her, that of the stereotypical dogged wife as a counterpart to the stereotypical oppressive husband, to take her fate into her own hands and finish the 'game' according to her own rules in a Nietzschean act of willpower. Such a 'tour de force' on her part, such a stark violation of the habitual power distribution in her marriage, is totally inconceivable to Whitney - so much so that he fails to recognize it when he arrives at the scene.

This failure sheds another light on Whitney's character and attitudes. Although he is much more considerate than his brother, his view of women does not seem much more enlightened. His very (mis)conceptions about typically female occupations (scrubbing, making parcels for Christmas, producing sweet smells in a kitchen), typically female behavior (the "undercurrent of hysteria" p.181, the nervousness, and the exaggerated girlishness and giggling are not picked up by Whitney as indicators that something is wrong), typically female naïveté ("How women crave being lied to - being deluded! Poor Ellen." p.180; "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." p.182; "How characteristic of women, how sweet, that they trust us as they do" p.187), and typically female mystery (menstruation - c.f. p.185, the bathroom scene) contribute to produce a bias that makes any penetration of the real events in the household nearly impossible, and that, on the other hand, together with the underlying meaning, creates superb effects of irony.

There are still other factors linking up to Whitney's self-delusion, for example the emotional component. The relationship between Whitney and Ellen is left ambiguous - although it does not seem very likely that they ever had an intimate connection, on evaluating the "bid for freedom" scene (176); but even this passage is not absolutely outspoken. There is no doubt a strong mutual liking there, and even some sort of love on Whitney's side,

for Ellen, and for the daughters, too ("How like their mother the daughters were, Whitney was thinking, with a pang of love, and loss - these three attractive, sweet-faced women, like benign Fates, his brother Quinn's family and not, not ever, *his*." p.185). Whether or not this merely results from envy of his brother is hard to determine (but envy is not very likely to be the *only* factor). At any rate, Whitney is undoubtedly emotionally involved when he enters the kitchen scene, thus having a mind barrier between his observations and the realization of the truth.

Whitney's cowardice contributes another such barrier. Spending his life in the shadow of an overpowering brother, he is not used to taking the initiative, not even mentally; he avoids it wherever possible. This, together with his upbringing - never to interfere - makes him readily hold on to the nearest convenient explanation presenting itself for anything odd that comes up during his visit at the house - thus, travel and Christmas preparations account for everybody's hypernervousness and hysteria, their readiness to accept Quinn's phony excuses accounts for the sudden travel plans, menstruation for the odor of blood; and when Molly and Trish tell Whitney not to "peek" at the odds and ends lying around in the kitchen, it is because they don't want him to discover his own Christmas present (184). It is sheer irony that he should still think that it is women who crave being lied to.

Another important trait of Whitney's character is his feeling of inferiority towards his brother, and the central domineering role Quinn has played in Whitney's life since their childhood, or in the Paxton family life in general. Whitney is so much in fear and in awe of his big brother that, even though his concern is for Ellen and the girls, his focus is entirely on Quinn the whole time he is at the house: "Whitney asked the question most urgent to him, hoping he didn't betray the apprehension he felt, 'Is - Quinn here?' " (179); "Whitney had to admit, he was profoundly relieved. The thought that his brother was no where close at hand, in no way an active threat to him - this restored Whitney's composure considerably." (179); "He frowned, wondering if perhaps Quinn had not gone, after all." (181); "And Whitney was eager to be gone. / For this *was* Quinn's house, after all." (185); "He'd been brave to go to Quinn's house - Ellen and the girls would always remember" (186). His fixation is thus that he sees Quinn as the only

potential source of violence in the household - if Quinn is gone, nothing can be threatening any more, and the premonition is carelessly dismissed.

The girls, Molly and Trish, aged fourteen and eleven, seem to be categorized in character in the same 'class' of females as their mother Ellen. They are not granted very much individuality that would make them substantial personalities in the story; rather, they are depicted to be so like their mother with "little of Quinn, or of the Paxtons, in them, only a twisty sort of curl to their hair, a pert upper lip" (185), that they function in no particular role of their own (other than, perhaps, representing to the reader's eye a rather scary type of the generation of "young Americans"), but only as pertaining to the conglomerate of "these three, attractive, sweet-faced women, like benign Fates" (185) that, of course, have very much determined the fate of Quinn.

There is a last distinct 'character' operating in the story - that of the Paxton family as an entity. This entity is described as a "large, gregarious, but close-knit clan" feeling "little sympathy for those who stirred up trouble, poked their noses where they weren't wanted." (176). The principles and rules that underly this clan-organization reflect on the lives of all members; a hierarchical, pitiless structure is erected that people like Quinn are made for to abuse. The tangibility of the character of this clan leads Ellen to remark to Whitney, "It's kind of you, and of Laura, to care about me and the girls [...] - it's so unlike the Paxtons! But then you and Laura aren't really Paxtons yourselves, are you." (179). Obviously, it means something to be a Paxton - to be cruel, subduing, strict and inhumane, one might suggest. Such is a society where human tragedies like Ellen's, but also Whitney's (as the family disappointment), are first made possible.

## 4. Perspective (Part II) and Narrative Modes

The technical level of much modern writing is high: the writer today is generally aware of the possibilities of his craft in a way that his predecessors were not. He is more careful in the choice of his ingredients and techniques: more self-conscious, more efficient, more attuned to an elite audience which assumes his command of narrative strategies and artifices. (Bonheim, 46)

We have the paradox [...] that as the writer becomes more sophisticated, he must try to seem less so. His selecting and manipulating hand must become as invisible as possible. He chooses a narrow rather than an omniscient point of view [...] (Bonheim, 47)

The 'invisible manipulating hand' - this is an outline of the *modus operandi* of many modern short story writers, and in particular of Joyce Carol Oates's "The Premonition". As has been said, the narrative is restricted to a very particular point of view, that of Whitney Paxton. He is the mediator in relation to whom the events and incidents occurring are set. Thus, the previous chapter has shown that "The Premonition" unfolds into some sort of "a creepy revelation of how little men know about women" (Allen, 6D), resulting from the fact that Whitney represents a male viewpoint (although a different one from what could have been expected from his brother's type of man). Yet his 'maleness' imports decisive features into his perspective, as has been demonstrated.

However, unlike many works that rely on a first person perspective as the most obvious means achieving a limitation of the story to a narrative angle, "The Premonition" is a clear *third* person narrative, using the more modernist technique of restricting the authorial narrator's very 'omniscience' to the cognitive map of one character only.

The dichotomy of surface and underlying meaning as exhibited in the story largely depends on such a limitation. A closer look at the mechanisms operating in this point of view-technique seems useful. Here, the tools of the narrative modes come into play.<sup>22</sup>

Bonheim points out that the more mimetic modes are the ones that contribute most to narrow the account to a particular point of view, and to direct the attention away from the author's guiding hand. These particular modes are 'speech' and 'report', as opposed to the less mimetic 'comment' and 'description'.<sup>23</sup> This principle applies directly to "The Premonition". In the first part of the story, the 'scenic' report (the "telescopic lens", as opposed to 'panoramic' report<sup>24</sup>) predominates, depicting mainly Whitney's action; intermingled with indirect renditions of Whitney's thoughts and feelings, sometimes associated with the appropriate 'verba dicendi' (e.g. "One of the privileges of adulthood, he thought, was keeping your distance from the font of discomfort and pain." p.174 "The bastard wouldn't dare, Whitney thought" p.175; "Was she expecting Quinn? Whitney wondered." p.177), but more often without such indicators (e.g. "Was no one home? But did he hear music? [...] Shoudn't they be home? And Ellen. too?" p.174; "Of course he would spend Christmas Day with the family. Or part of the day. Impossible to avoid, so long as he continued to live in the city of his birth." p.174; "What if Quinn had done something to Ellen and the girls, in a fit of rage?" p.175; "But, no, better not think of that now." p.176; "But if Quinn was home, and something was wrong, might not Quinn be - dangerous? [...] And, if he'd been drinking..." p. 177). Mostly, though, this 'substitutionary' speech<sup>25</sup> is fused with the report, so that a distinction between the two modes is hardly possible - or even called for: e.g. "Not that Whitney was a superstitious man. He wasn't." (172); "So, though he wasn't the type to interfere in others' marriages, still less in his brother's private life, Whitney got in his car, and drove across the city [...]" (173); "Apart from the Christmas lights of a few houses he'd passed entering Whitewater Heights, he had no sense of an imminent holiday" (174). Bonheim explains:

This tendency to fuse the modes is an essential quality of modern narrative technique, just as it has become increasingly difficult to separate the narrator's perceptions and comments from those of the characters. Dolezel speaks of the 'neutralization of oppositions in the stylistic structure of narrative prose.'

(Bonheim, 11)

The second part of "The Premonition" is marked by a notable change in the

modes - speech shifts from a predominance of the indirect (substitutionary) form to one of dialogue, as Ellen opens the door and Whitney enters the house. There is still frequent report (also in the flashbacks), but quite considerable passages of 'fused' description, too, are introduced, most prominently at the beginning of section four (pp.184). This particular concentration on the descriptive mode serves a specific function: the emphasis shifts to visual perception, and brings a hint of objectivity into the perspective of the mediator Whitney which is crucial in so far as it promotes an interpretation of the scene by the reader which is emancipated from Whitney's, although the material facts are still provided by him. The reader is encouraged to assess the situation from his or her uninvolved view. This becomes even more evident when the visual sense is complemented by the olfactory (c.f. the smell of blood in the kitchen and the bathroom).

Whitney's explanation that the 'peculiar odor' has to do with strictly female business (menstruation) has practically no influence on the reader's perception of the underlying meaning enhanced by the chicken-image- that this is most certainly Quinn's blood he is smelling.

Apart from this important function, the descriptive mode, together with the direct speech mode, slows down the story's pace considerably compared to the first part - narrated time is brought closer in line with narrating time at this point to make the impression created more immediate to the reader.

The very 'concert' of the modes on the overall scale of "The Premonition", i.e. their interrelation and interaction, in their specific constellations and proportions is another vital generative force in the creation of the underlying sense of the story. In the chapter "Reader Participation", Bonheim quotes Stanzel, speaking of the " 'complementary narrative' which the reader conceives so as to complete the one which the writer presets." (Bonheim, 47) Although Bonheim relativizes this notion, in claiming that readers only do this in a "selective way" (Bonheim, 48), it appears to come to bear directly in "The Premonition": It does seem plausible, especially when applied to this story, that "the dynamic narrative modes [i.e. speech and report], although they require little reader response in the same mode, they elicit it in the other, i.e. complementary narrative modes [comment and description respectively]" (Bonheim 49); and this can explain why the reader of "The Premonition" is able to form his or her own 'comments' (i.e. explanations or interpretations of persons, places, objects and actions -



assigning purposes, causes, motivations<sup>26</sup>) from the dialogue (speech mode), especially the speech of Ellen and her daughters, whose characters and motives are otherwise so very 'sketchy', and to infer what the three women were really doing for their Christmas preparation, which is murdering Quinn and cutting up his corpse.

Description, on the other hand, is in itself a 'cool' mode, a mode inviting reader participation, leaving gaps for the reader to fill in - mostly also in the range of comment or vivid imagining.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it provides already enough material as evidence for the reader's own (horrible) conclusions, and the puzzle is put together in the reader's mind.

## 5. Language and Stylistic Features

In their introduction to *Literature and Language Teaching*, Brumfit and Carter state that "literature is not a language variety." (Brumfit, 8) They point out:

There is no such thing as literary language which can be recognized and isolated in the same way as, for example, the language of newspaper headlines, or legal language, or the language variety of weather forecasting. (Brumfit, 8)

Literature rather uses a 'layering' of linguistic features across the whole text in any possible variety so as to produce a unity and consistency of effect.<sup>28</sup> Thus it has become more and more obvious, especially in modern literature, that to associate 'literariness' with a certain highly sophisticated and poetic register of expression is contestable, if not utter nonsense.

"The Premonition" is such an example of a modern work of fiction where the register alone is a rather minor factor in the assessment of its quality as 'literature'. The variety chosen for the narrative is not at all poetic. On the other hand, it is not basely colloquial either; syntax and lexis are in fact terribly 'normal', for lack of a better word - such as may be found in quite a number of American prose texts nowadays. Of course, in a work of literature, such marked 'inconspicuousness' suggests the existence of a higher reason for it.

In the present case of "The Premonition", it has been mentioned that the story is told from a limited perspective, the author trying to hide as much as possible behind her mediator, i. a. by fusing the mode of the character's substitutionary speech with the mode of report, especially in the first part. It seems that to enhance the effect of consistency throughout the text thus created, author and mediator must communicate on the same level of language. Thus, a rather *neutral* register, consisting of straightforward expression, easy to process (not too intricate) syntax, often occurring short sentences, contractions, and a not too elaborate or poetic lexicon, may serve as a balancing common denominator for the expression of Whitney's thoughts as well as the author's complementary information. The use of such a neutral register seems all the more sensible, as the same language level may be adopted in the dialogues of the second part of the story, too, thus integrating them perfectly into the flow of the narrative instead of dividing the reader's attention between the use and the meaning of language. In "The Premonition", all the focus is on meaning, and the very subtlety in which it presents itself demands the mobilisation of all of the reader's mental resources, and makes a split of attention highly undesirable.

Yet, the generative process of such an underlying sense demands a deliberate phrasing, so as not to leave the discovery of the message to mere coincidence. Joyce Carol Oates solves this problem by providing the reader with an abundance of details all of which point towards the same implication (e.g. the blaring radio, the small hatbox, the oblong container, the spotless bathtub etc. etc). If the reader is not able to process all of these meaningful items, he or she will in any case collect enough of them to arrive at the intended conclusions. Those elements, though, that make most

essential contributions to the realization of the underlying sense need to be given more prominence in the text to catch the reader's eye. This is where Joyce Carol Oates relies on the stylistic device of 'foregrounding'.

Foregrounding is the (linguistic) highlighting of certain textual features, a prominence of aspects that is motivated.<sup>29</sup> Lexical symbols are marked out as having particular indexical value, i.e. pointing to an underlying context that does not read in the mere semantical combination of the words.<sup>30</sup>

In "The Premonition", this tool is all the more valuable as it allows the author to stress certain elements without having to compromise the use of the narrow perspective. It is usually employed by means of a skillful text arrangement. The position at the end of a given paragraph is always the most prominent one due to the break that inevitably follows; sentences and phrases placed in this position are automatically foregrounded in the reader's perception. Notable examples in part one of "The Premonition" include: "[...] he had a premonition." (172, paragraph one); "It could be dangerous even offering Quinn unsolicited advice." (172, par. four); "[...] and sometimes those hands hurt." (173, par. one); "By then, too, it might be too late." (174, par. four); etc. The recurring prominent form of the question in Whitney's substitutionary speech is another manifestation of foregrounding: "Was no one home? But did he hear music? [...] Shouldn't they be home? And Ellen, too?" (174); "What if Quinn had done something to Ellen and the girls in a fit of rage?" (175); etc.

The technically most important instances of foregrounding occur in the second part. Here, the reader's suspicions about Ellen need to be aroused by the author while at the same time Whitney's cluelessness is provided for.

The starting point is the very instance Ellen opens the door. Her manner is highly awkward - she is depicted as nervous, evasive and non-committal. The highlighting of certain elements create a context in which she appears outright suspicious. This highlighting is achieved by various means: insistence ("Worried? About me? [...] About *me*?" p.177); positioning ("Her tone suggested vast relief, and a curious hilarity beneath the relief." end of paragraph, p.178); slight incongruence of answers ("Is he in town? / "He's gone." p.179); pauses and laughs 'at the wrong places' ("[...] you know

Quinn [...] his brain never *stops*-" p.179); overall semantic patterning ("He's gone." - "his brain never stops" - "No need to anatomize Quinn." p.179) to give a few examples. The combination of these components creates a dynamic of its own which generates the incriminating implications. The reader can no longer accept Whitney's portrayal of Ellen as a meek victim of domestic abuse; she just falls out of this stereotypical frame.

Once such an underlying background is established, analogue patterning allows for any foregrounded elements further on to 'click into place' - thus the descriptive elements in focus: the girls' preoccupations in the kitchen - the scrubbing with rubber gloves that make sucking sounds, and the sponging - become suspicious, too, as well as the poignant smells both in the kitchen and in the bathroom; most prominently feature the packages, taking up much of the available space in the kitchen, and the incongruous tools, among them the terrible carving knife for meat, all placed "on a section of green plastic garbage bag on the floor, as if awaiting removal to the garage, or disposal" (184) as well as the meaningful center piece, the *butcher block*, which causes terror by sheer association. As the narrative moves on, all these rather protruding elements collect in the reader's mind as hints adding up to the terrible picture.

The realization of the imagery which adds the symbolical edge to "The Premonition" largely depends on the interpretation of the underlying meaning. Once the course is set, though, the images present themselves to the reader in sheer abundance. The very act of the cleaning up receives a new significance: more than the erasing of the murderous traces, it becomes symbolic of the act of getting even, of wiping out a chapter (or a person) from one's life. The symbolical value of the kitchen as the traditional female domain has already been discussed, as well as the climactic chicken-killing metaphor. The image of the three "benign Fates", of course, is highly ironical, as we know by now that Ellen and the girls were by no means benign playing 'fate' for Quinn.

The all-embracing symbol in the story, however, is the Christmas season. The feast of love and joy, of hope and glory is grotesquely perverted to serve as the setting for a deadly crime, whose shameless celebration has

nothing holy about it, indeed. Christmas, the family uniting feast of peace - and murder? The black comedy and dark irony of "The Premonition" are once more vividly apparent.

Irony is the general tone of the story. However, like the imagery it operates in the second dimension of the narrative, taking its power from the tension between the harmless surface account and the subversive sub-dynamic of the murder tale. Passages such as "How like women, to be thinking of others at such a time!" (182); "Whitney uneasily anticipated the comments that would be made, on Christmas Day, when Quinn and his family were absent - willfully absent, it would seem." (183); "So many presents! - Ellen and the girls must have been working for hours. Whitney was touched, if a bit bemused by their industry" (184); and (as a sort of finale):

*To Uncle Whitney with love - Ellen, Molly, Trish.* Quite pointedly, Quinn's name had been omitted, and Whitney felt satisfaction that Ellen had taken revenge of sorts upon her selfish husband, however petty and inconsequential a revenge. (186)

- such passages become outright hilarious as soon as the underlying meaning adds a new context. Such dark irony, complemented by more immediate tongue-in-cheek humor (Whitney understanding "that he'd disappointed [his parents] by failing to grow into the kind of son Quinn had grown into [...]," p.174; Quinn, the brute, seriously toying with the idea of running for office, p.175; Whitney recalling that policemen are most frequently shot when investigating domestic quarrels, p.177; etc.) makes "The Premonition" wickedly funny to the very end. Together with the chills and horrors subtly administered, the story adds up to a superb piece of Oatesian grotesque.

## 6. Themes and Issues

All art is generated out of conflict; without conflict there can be no movement, no development - no story.

(Joyce Carol Oates)<sup>31</sup>

The conflicts that generate Joyce Carol Oates's stories are frequently sources of brutal violence. Rape and murder are recurring elements, although the gruesome violence that manifests itself need not necessarily be described in full explicitness. Such is the case in "The Premonition", where the terrible crime of the murder and the bloody dismembering of the corpse are never directly touched upon. The only visible violence originates from Quinn, who physically abuses his family.

Critics have often accused Oates of using too much violence in her fiction, and of rendering a distorted, negative vision of reality. She justifies herself by observing:

[...] It is commonly understood that serious writers, as distinct from entertainers or propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods, [...] the serious writer, after all, bears witness. (CA, 316)

and elsewhere, "I wish the world were a prettier place, but I wouldn't be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me." (Graham, 406) This illustrates Oates's commitment as a social writer and critic; she prefers to write about 'real' people in a 'real' world, and American social problems and issues feature largely in her works. She feels that there is an intimate relationship between society and art:

Society is a living organism ceaselessly defining itself, shifting its boundaries, taking shape from the future no less than from the past; art is the formal record of its inchoate struggles, its dreams, nightmares, and visions. (Oates, "Literary Culture", Netpg. 1)

Indeed, the author Joyce Carol Oates appears to be such a faithful witness of her time that a critic once claimed, "A future archeologist equipped with only her œuvre could easily piece together the whole of postwar America." (CA, 316)

"The Premonition" certainly bears some harsh criticism of (American) society: it describes the mechanisms operating in the social microcosm of a perfectly dysfunctional family. In the 'tattered social fabric' of the Paxton clan,<sup>32</sup> domestic abuse is a tolerated trifle that is not worth disturbing the 'family peace' for; in the patriarchal hierarchy typically associated with such human constellations, a woman's place is at the bottom, where she may serve as an "unfailingly glamorous" decorative object, "quiet, reserved, beautiful," always in "stylishly high heels" (178), the perfect silently suffering victim. Such an unhealthy, repressive, and autocratic climate is an ideal soil where violence may thrive. However, in "The Premonition", the ultimate violence reaches out from the unexpected side: in a gruesome act of emancipation, the 'weak', Ellen, Molly, and Trish, rise in arms and kill the tyrannical Quinn.

Such a distinct shift of power to the female agents raises the issue of feminism in the story. There is no doubt that in "The Premonition" the women are the laughing 'winners' - together, they outdo their male counterparts: Quinn loses his life, and Whitney never realizes what is really going on. Thus, the story develops into a biting satire on traditional power roles and the 'revolution of the oppressed'. It cannot be deduced, however, that Joyce Carol Oates is another American feminist author. Although she frequently manifests open sympathy for women's issues, she is far from being a doctrinaire 'porte-parole' of the movement. She even firmly opposes the traditional categorization of 'writers' (male) as opposed to 'woman writers', feeling that an artist's work should not be judged on the basis of his or her sex. She has conceived the formulation (woman) writer<sup>33</sup> in explanation:

I choose to bracket (woman) writer because the writer who is a woman, while perceiving herself as a writer, foremost, and not gender-determined in her art, is nonetheless perceived by others as a woman primarily, and a writer secondarily: thus: (woman) writer. An ontological paradox, for of course there are no (men) writers, only writers - who are men. (Oates, "Literary Culture", Netpg. 8)

Yet, she recapitulates, "being so ghettoized [by one's gender] seems insulting until the (woman) writer stops to realize that a ghetto, after all, is a place in which to live; raze it, and she may find herself homeless altogether." (Oates, *(Woman) Writer*, 28), and elsewhere, "perhaps to have a sex-determined voice, or to be believed to have one, is, after all, better than to have no voice at all."<sup>34</sup>

Empathy and sympathy with the insulted and injured of her characters are recurrently found in Oates's stories. But her compassion never diminishes the severe look she casts on human nature; and thus the horror the reader will feel faced with the murder is deliberately intensified rather than alleviated by the satire. The motives are compelling, especially from a female reader's perspective, yet the bloody deed is certainly not presented as a solution for domestic problems worth imitating (even though just punishment may be escaped). There subsists a psychopathic quality to the act that is most likely to elicit serious goose bumps and nervous laughs from the reader rather than any *immoral* qualms...

## 7. Synthesis



Each work of fiction has its own distinctive voice and the challenge for the writer [...] is to discover and to refine the voice that is unique to that work. (Joyce Carol Oates)<sup>35</sup>

The 'voice' of "The Premonition" is the concert of all the various components that have been analyzed in the course of this paper, which together ultimately spell the 'real', the underlying meaning, the murder tale. That this resulting message is basically the same for all readers,<sup>36</sup> is a more remarkable achievement than it might seem at first glance. The principle of reader participation, which the story virtually lives on, inevitably involves the unreliable human factor, which means that every individual person will bring his or her own set of 'knowledges' and thoughts to the text, and that any interpretation will draw from this individual person's background and schematic knowledge.<sup>37</sup> This is a natural process and one reason why so many different interpretations of any one given work of literature come to exist.

The fact that there is some common denominator on which the majority of readers will agree after reading "The Premonition", a common sub-tale that everybody reads between the lines, gives still more evidence of the masterly skill with which the story has been 'crafted' by Joyce Carol Oates, and displays the depth of psychological insight she possesses and uses to guide her readers. Such insight allows her to reach out to her audience on the cognitive as well as on the *emotional* level, in analogy to what Miall suggests, which is that "emotion plays a crucial role in the formative aspects of the reading process" (Miall, 11). In "The Premonition", an extension of the generative process of meaning to bring in the rank of emotions is aimed at from the very beginning. This is where the title itself plays its role: the reader learns that a 'premonition', i.e. a feeling that something, especially something unpleasant, is going to happen,<sup>38</sup> will somehow figure in the story, and the connotation of unpleasantness is likely to alert the attention. Thus, when the opening paragraphs eventually bring into play the factors alcohol, threat, and violence, the appropriate frames of reference are called up in the reader's mind ("it was a familiar story" p.172), to create there, to an uncertain degree and probably only subconsciously, but yet

pronouncedly, a feeling of *apprehension*. The widely attested<sup>39</sup> reader's innate urge to project a story outline will 'kick in', and, in the strongest case, the mind's eye will already see Ellen and/or the girls somewhere in a coffin. Oates very deliberately sets up this emotional scheme - later on, it serves as valuable moulding material when the 'real' events begin to show through the text. After all, it is Quinn who is murdered by Ellen, and not the other way round as one is led to suppose. The point is then that this conscious initial misleading of the reader, starting out with the title and continuing through the whole first part when he or she is still of the same 'opinion' as Whitney, is a necessary preparation for the interpretation of the ultimate outcome. Because unlike Whitney, the reader, already apprehensive, alerted, curious, sees his or her original expectations not simply unfulfilled, but rather modified in *subject*: owing to Ellen's most peculiar behavior and the ensuing circumstantial evidence, the initial assumptions will only have to be readjusted to project a wholly different, yet no less gruesome disaster. The step is a rather small one from one terrible hypothesis to the other (which becomes more and more a certainty), due to the ingenious set-up; and the reader is immediately bound to believe in the very worst possible outcome. Such playing games with expectations is probably a particular feature of literary discourse, as the artist usually strives to avoid stock responses and to guide the reader towards a reorganization of his or her patterns of thought and experience.<sup>40</sup> The most obvious solution is rarely the author's 'thing', which is one reason why we still read literature.

There is still enough ambiguity left in "The Premonition", once the overall meaning has been established, to nourish a variety of additional thoughts and interpretations (What is the exact contents of the individual packages? What is in the package Whitney received? Will really nothing dawn on Whitney, even after he thinks things over again? etc. etc.) but that makes the story even more interesting.

At any rate- in the end, the picture is complete. Whitney drives home, happy that Ellen and the girls have entrusted him with his present before Christmas. What the reader has been entrusted with is the story of Quinn's violent death. Christmas at the Paxton's house this year will still be a family

uniting feast, even if one of them is 'out on a limb'...

"Because the meaning of a story does not lie on its surface, visible and self-defining, does not mean that meaning does not exist."

(Joyce Carol Oates, "American Short Stories", 8).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further biographical informations c.f. the forthcoming authorized biography *Invisible Writer* by Greg Johnson, expected publication date: spring 1998; New York: Dutton.

<sup>2</sup> C.f. Plett, I, Netpg. 4.

<sup>3</sup> This quotation is frequently found in the comments, c.f. i.a. Johnson, "Brief Biography", Netpg. 2)

<sup>4</sup> C.f. Johnson, "Invisible Writer", Netpg. 6. Some years ago, Oates retorted more acidly when accosted with the matter of her prolificacy, "Perhaps critics (mainly male) who charge me with writing too much are secretly afraid that someone will accuse them of having done too little with their lives." (c.f. i.a. Plett, II, Netpg. 5; and CA, 316).

<sup>5</sup> C.f. Johnson, "Invisible Writer", Netpg. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Copies of the magazine could be located in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and at the University of Ann Arbor, Michigan, but could not be made available. For the full reference c.f. bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> The subtitle *Tales of the Grotesque* refers back to Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) which included i.a. "The Fall of the House of Usher".

<sup>8</sup> *Haunted* contains a paraphrased version of James' "The Turn of the Screw" (1891), entitled "Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly" and told from the ghost's perspective.

<sup>9</sup> C.f. Oates, "Afterword", 304.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Joslin, Dictionary of Literary Biography contributor, quoted in: CA, 318.

<sup>11</sup> C.f. chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> C.f. Oates's definition quoted in the introductory part.

<sup>13</sup> For the linguistic aspects refer to Widdowson, Language Purpose and Language Use, 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> C.f. chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> C.f. Oates's short story definition as quoted in the introductory part.

<sup>16</sup> The image seems to have been provided by Oates's childhood farm reminiscences.

<sup>17</sup> I find it useful to split up the analysis of perspective into two parts; to view it here in the light of Whitney's character, and in part two under more technical aspects.

<sup>18</sup> C.f. chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> It might even be argued that Whitney's very name underlines this 'lack' of virility - 'Whitney' may be used for a boy as well as for a girl.

<sup>20</sup> C.f. chapter 7.

<sup>21</sup> Although the outcome makes the reader wonder if anyone has ever asked Ellen about this personally or whether this is just the 'official version' (Whitney's or the family's).

<sup>22</sup> The basic definitions and concepts necessary for the following analysis are mainly taken over from Bonheim.

<sup>23</sup> C.f. Bonheim, 47.

<sup>24</sup> C.f. Bonheim, 41.

<sup>25</sup> C.f. Bonheim, 21. This is the English term coming closest to the German 'erlebte Rede', which would be most exact.

<sup>26</sup> C.f. Bonheim, 33.

<sup>27</sup> C.f. Bonheim, 47.

<sup>28</sup> C.f. Brumfit, 8.

<sup>29</sup> C.f. Malmkjaer, s.v. Stylistics.

<sup>30</sup> This is an application of H.G. Widdowson's distinction of the 'symbol' as a unit of semantic meaning with a specifiable sense and denotation; and of the 'index' as a unit of pragmatic meaning used for the act or reference. For a detailed linguistic description c.f. Widdowson, *Learning Purpose*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 136; original quotation from the preface to Litzinger, Boyd and Joyce Carol Oates, eds., *Short Story: Fictions Past and Present* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Heath, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> C.f. Upchurch, 34.

<sup>33</sup> C.f. Oates's book of the same title.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 119; orig. publ. in Todd, Janet, ed., *Gender and Literary Voice* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980)

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Johnson, *Short Fiction*, 28; orig. publ. in Arteseros, Sally, ed., *American Voices: Best Short Fiction by Contemporary Authors* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 83.

<sup>36</sup> To make sure this is the case I have tested the story on various persons, and all realized about the same message from reading the text, that of the murder and the corpse being cut up and wrapped in Christmas packages; the

reviews I found hint at the same, so there must be a universality.

<sup>37</sup> C.f. Widdowson, *Learning Purpose*, chapter two (32-79).

<sup>38</sup> C.f. Longman, s.v. premonition.

<sup>39</sup> C.f. i.a. Miall's article.

<sup>40</sup> C.f. Widdowson, *Learning Purpose*, 37.

Joyce Carol Oates (born June 16, 1938) is an American writer. Oates published her first book in 1963 and has since published 58 novels, as well as a number of plays and novellas, and many volumes of short stories, poetry, and nonfiction. She has won many awards for her writing, including the National Book Award, for her novel *Them* (1969), two O. Henry Awards, the National Humanities Medal and the Jerusalem Prize (2019). Her novels *Black Water* (1992), *What I Lived For* (1994), and *Blonde* (2000) and In Joyce Carol Oates's new novel, a curse infects Princeton, N.J., beginning in 1905 when a new bride is abducted by a demon in front of a church congregation. In the case of "The Accursed," both strictures apply. What I wish I could say is simply this: Joyce Carol Oates has written what may be the world's first postmodern Gothic novel: E. L. Doctorow's "Ragtime" set in Dracula's castle. It's dense, challenging, problematic, horrifying, funny, prolix and full of crazy people. You should read it.