Mystified Life:
Joyce Carol Oates' Adaptation of *Wonderland*

RATHINASAMY NAGALAKSHMI

Nehru Memorial College (Bharathidasan University), India

KULAMANGALAM THIAGARAJAN TAMILMANI

Nehru Memorial College (Bharathidasan University), India

Abstract

It is apodictic that postmodernism gravitates towards fragmented narratives, apparently “real” diegesis and characters in a chaos-ridden frame. The postmodern novel is a “looking glass” that delineates the vertigo instigated by “reality,” which is an artifice that leads to amending interpretations. The paradox of “fictionalizing the reality” creates heterogeneous reverberations among individuals. There is no preconception, but moments of revelation and realization. The theories of language alleviate the transcription of the intense and inevitable relationship between the text and the reader. The theoretical underpinnings, formulated on the basis of the multiple interpretations emanated by readers, foreground the fact that texts are constituents of our linguistic community, and are diversified with individual and cultural experiences. In this way, the consideration of the text extends beyond its stature of being a mere “object.” Joyce Carol Oates’ *Wonderland* is a text which abounds in intertextual references in the postmodern context. Oates has taken up the issues of destiny and identity from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, as the thematic source. The protagonist, Jesse, does not enter a world of fantasy; rather, she enters a world that is real, absurd and phantasmagorical. The article purports to analyse *Wonderland* as “hypertext” and accentuate how the fragments of discourses in it, based on Carroll’s work as the hypotext, have acquired a transpositional change of meaning.

Keywords: Joyce Carol Oates, American fiction, fragments of discourse, intertextuality, literary symbiosis, postmodernism, self, mystified life

Introduction

A text has always been seen as a corpus, plot with ideas, emerging out of the experiences of the writer. But what postmodern writers, theorists and critics like Umberto Eco, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley and others ascertain is the coaction of texts that results in synergy. The idiosyncratic details of the author found in the text are of negligible importance and, Wimsatt and Beardsley claim that the interpretive process necessitates that the text be assessed without any “fallacy.” Heinrich F. Plett suggests: “It is not true that works are created by their authors. Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intentions of their authors” (193).

The influential proposition of text as a terrain in which words occupy a spatial arrangement, resulting in the emergence of diversified suppositions, have led to discussions of intertextuality. The intertextual reading of a text is not an avant-garde attempt since it can be traced back to the concept of “mimesis” put forward by Plato and Aristotle. It emphasizes the notion that a literary text is, as Mikhail Bakhtin stated: “a hybrid construction” (287). The rearrangement of signs/ words in the textual space, symbiotic to the “always already” synchronic system, diverges from attributing “originality” to the text. The exponents of intertextuality behold a text as a wide-ranging space, and, meaning, they say, can be obtained by tracing the differential components in it.

In his essay “‘Working Effects with Words’ – Whose Words?: Stylistics and Reader Intertextuality,” David Birch argues that “the starting point for interpretation processes has to be the language of the text” (257). What is written (language) gains prominence in creating and shaping the text. Intertextuality may be seen as an appropriation of previous exegesis that results in the transpositional change of meaning. Correspondingly, intertextuality is inclined to correlate texts, and it enables the readers to relate the approximations found in separate works. The recontextualized text often reflects the dispositions prevalent during the time it is written. Furthermore, intertextual interpretations aim at providing a critical approach to reading the reading process. Thus, a text, as Roland Barthes states, is “made up of multiple writings, drawn from

many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (*Image* 148).

Apparently, the intertextual concept envisions a text as a "compilation of cultural textuality" (Allen 35), and "[n]o utterance," Graham Allen says, advocating Bakhtinian logic, "is monumental" (19). What appears to be a prevalent practice may become outdated or may be updated. Linda Hutcheon explicates intertextuality as an interest that rejects the author. She states that intertextuality: "depend[s] upon an implied theory of reading and decoding" (*A Theory* 23), corroborating Barthes' view of "the death of the author" (*Image* 148). Mere denigration of abstract ideas, however, will not help in investigating the codes of a text. It has to be replaced by the interrelatedness of literary texts.

In intertextual space, a text explodes, thereby transforming "readerly texts" into "writerly texts" (Barthes, *S/Z* 15). This questions the finite structure and the possibility of truth being delivered to the readers. Hence, the intertextual space adheres to the postmodern dogmas that foster blending fragments. Incidentally, investigating truth culminates in the shift in the subject position. Allen affirms that "whenever subjects enter language they enter into situations in which their personal subjectivity is lost" (40). These "lost subjects" are revived by the interpretations of the readers. The "otherness" they gain is due to their transition into, what Jacques Derrida calls "transcendental signifieds" (qtd. in Allen 31). In Bakhtinian and Julia Kristeva's terms, the meaning is obtained by "heteroglossia" or "hybridity."

Instead of the synchronic system of language, Bakhtin concentrates on the addressivity of words and utterances. Addressivity results from the juxtaposition of words in a specific context, and sometimes a single word can contrast itself. This way, all utterances are variables, produced by the span of time. Thus, the sociolects juxtapose to create specific idiolects concomitant with the specific period of time. The reconciliation between the text and the readers confers authority, previously held by authors, on the readers to decipher the hidden multiple meanings. The readers extract meaning from a text by weaving a web of textual relations with their previous readings or experiences. Suitably, the rationale in decoding a text involves: i) a radical plurality of signs; ii) the relation between signs and

text and the cultural text; iii) the relation between a text and the literary system; and iv) the transformative relation between a text and other texts.

The Text and the Co-text

This article attempts to discuss Oates' *Wonderland* (1971) as the "hypertext" (new text) of the "hypotext" (original/ source text) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. *Wonderland* is a kind of bildungsroman of Jesse, the protagonist. The novel begins with Jesse becoming an orphan due to the homicidal act of his father, Willard Harte. He is then looked after by his maternal grandfather, Vogel, who accuses Jesse's dead parents for the devastation they had cast on themselves. The somatic and psychic banishment from his grandfather and the loathed looks of his uncle and aunt take Jesse to the Niagara County Home for Boys, where he meets Dr. Pedersen, a famous neurosurgeon.

After becoming Dr. Pedersen's adopted son, Jesse is persuaded to lead a meaningful life. Dr. Pedersen's stimulations pervade his mind to such extent that he, despite the dissenting incidents and comments from Hilda (step-sister) and Mrs. Pedersen, persists to admire him. His life takes a different road when he learns what Dr. Pedersen was really up to. He is given no time but is made to renounce his claim to be a member of the Pedersen family. Then, he stays isolated and his passion and yearning for love and family grow simultaneously.

Unfortunately, Jesse's love affair with Ann-Marie fails and he becomes pensive about his ambitions. This makes him admire neurotherapeutic physicians (Dr. Monk, Dr. Cady and Dr. Perrault). Although his marriage to Helene Cady partially satisfies him, he becomes volatile at a point that he shifts his attention towards Reva Denk. Reva exploits his feelings for her and leaves him bereft. These ineffectual relationships are overcome by Jesse's success as a neurosurgeon.

The extremities, that the novel projects, are based on the American society of the 1960s. Jesse travels through a series of tribulations before he can catch on to reality. Jesse's runaway daughter, Michele, "Shelley," writes him a series of letters that disturb him. He decides to save her from the detrimental hold of her drug-dealer lover, Noel, not realizing that his

own “self” was the real “devil” that had haunted her. The novel ends with a kind of plausible conversation that stirs up the implausible schisms of our brain.

The novel can be studied in parallel with Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. A parallel reading of the hypertext (new text – *Wonderland*) and the hypotext (source text – *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*) enhances the reading process and exalts the creative aspiration of the writers. It enables the readers to understand the shift in the linguistic sphere over time. Such a study aids in the cognitive process involved in decoding the labyrinth of texts and in detecting the lacuna that has promoted the emergence of the hypertext.

Carroll introduces Alice, a small girl, who sees a White Rabbit with a pocket clock and wearing a waistcoat. She follows the Rabbit and falls into the Rabbit hole that takes her to the Curious Hall. There, she finds a pitcher labeled “*Drink me*” and a plate with a piece of cake labeled “*Eat me.*” After consuming them, she either shrinks or grows. Later, she finds many doors locked in varying sizes and discovers the key to the smallest one. For instance, when she becomes minuscule, she swims across the sea of her tears, and finds animals and birds which take the Caucus-Race – running in a circle. She also encounters more such bewildering events like being ordered by the White Rabbit to find the Duchess’ gloves and fan, getting hurt by the animals who throw pebbles at her thinking her to be a giant, and so on.

The Caterpillar is the only character that seems to understand the difficulty that Alice faces in ‘defining her identity.’ With great efforts, she reaches the Duchess’ place where the violent sneezing sound and the insentient behavior of the cook create a hum-drum. She meets the Cheshire cat after leaving the palace, and on his advice, advances towards the March Hare’s House. The March Hare, the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse are not good hosts as they comment on her appearance and insult her with their abnormal and nonsensical riddles.

Refraining from joining the tea party, Alice reaches the Garden of the Queen of Hearts. She finds the procession of cards and is excited when the Queen invites her for a game of Croquet. She is taken aback by the equipment that has been used for the game – living animals. The Gryphon,

then, introduces Alice to the Mock Turtle, who is unhappy for no reason. She is suddenly snatched away by the Gryphon who takes her to the Trial Room. The Knave of Hearts was accused of stealing the Queen's tarts and Alice grows up gradually during the proceedings. The jury composed of animals calls Alice to bear witness, but the King and the Queen dismiss her for violating the rule – being taller than a mile. Though Alice strives to prove her innocence, she is accused of stealing. When Alice goes mad and calls them all a mere “pack of cards,” the cards swarm over her in retaliation. Suddenly, she hears someone calling her name, and wakes up finding her sister removing leaves off her face and leaves the garden reluctantly after what she had seen in the dream.

Review of Related Literature

A text – as Kristeva states in her work *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980) – “is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (36). Harold Bloom has given a juxtaposing view of the theory of intertextuality propounded by Kristeva. Bloom's “belatedness” and “the conflictual vision of the intertextual process” (qtd. in Allen 131) result from a kind of defense mechanism that writers involve themselves in. The stages in Bloom's “revisionary ratios” appraise the originality of a poet/ writer by interpreting the variations in the intensity in being an exponent of intertextuality. Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997) delineates the relationship that the poets maintain with their precursors. This can be applied in other ways, where the influences of forerunners are thrust on contemporary writers/ works. The revisionary ratios probe into the originality of the writer/ work and produce a fracture in the complex network of texts. This fracture, as an analytical tool, enables the readers to calibrate the creativity of the writers. In her essay entitled “Joyce Carol Oates: A Portrait,” Elaine Showalter acknowledges Oates as having “the uncanny personal power of genius” (139). Oates has been exploring in her novels, what Bloom calls, the “melodramas of opposites” (2). In her dissertation entitled “The Image of Self in Select Works of Joyce Carol

Oates" (1977), Mary Ann Wilson identifies *Wonderland* to be the hero's quest in which "Jesse assumes a series of fictive selves in a futile attempt to annihilate his personality, while the circular pattern of the novel reinforces his doomed struggle" (v).

In the essay *Seven Types of Intertextuality* (2004), Robert S. Miola identifies different types of intertextuality: Revision, Translation, Quotation, Sources, Conventions and Configurations, Genres and Paralogues. Miola distinguishes these types on the basis of the working of the conscious and the unconscious. Efficacy of utterances is attainable when these types are put in specific social conditions and they promulgate how meaning is deduced from the human-centered and socially specific aspect of language (Miola 13). Greg Johnson has stated in his 1987 work *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* that Oates is remarkable with "the complexity and deliberate playfulness of her fictional strategies" (13). Liheng Wang's research article, "Self and Other – An Analysis of Jesse in *Wonderland*" (2011), analyses the perspectives of struggle and provides insight into Jesse's efforts to become an "individual" in a traumatic society.

The aim of the present study is to venture into the phrases that have been subsumed and have acquired transpositional change in meaning. It also highlights the journey of Jesse, a man in the post-war world, replicating Alice in the imaginary land, and how he approaches the world that is filled with revelations – both elusive and defensive.

America – A "Wonderland"

Oates, a prolific American woman writer, can be seen as an exponent of "Askesis." Askesis, as Bloom defines it, "is a way of purgation intending a state of solitude as its proximal goal" (116). It is a state in which the writer establishes his/ her "imaginative" individuality without besmirching the predecessors/ incidents that influenced writing. *Wonderland* is an insightful heuristic for the study of the pluralistic and multifarious conflicts that have shattered the imperturbable congruence of American tradition. In his pursuit of American selfhood, Jesse, the protagonist, showcases the traumatized American psyche and the

frustrating and threatening concepts of idealism. To record the nightmares of the wobbling affairs of the Americans, Oates wields Carroll's work as thematic source. She depicts in the novel, "how some individuals find a way out, awaken, come alive, move on to the future" (Oates 51).

Oates is concerned with portraying who the Americans are, and the paradox involved in fashioning the personality. She has inscribed in her book: "to those who pursue the phantasmagoria of personality" (n. p. – dedication). Phantasmagoria was a theatrical form in America during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This form projected spooky images on stage while narrating capricious and bizarre events. "Phantasmagoria of personality" would then refer to the odd way of presenting reality or questioning the validity of appearance. It is expressed in the novel as organized chaos, where personality does not mean an individual's distinctive temperament but is formulated by combining dispositions. The ideologies that Jesse absorbs penetrate and subdue his personality, and the ascendancy of "father figures" leaves his personality phantasmagorical. Personality, accordingly, is derealized as a mere phantasm – a real unreality.

Oates' inventiveness is concerned with the tenuousness of human personality. She is insistently interested in the frightening horrors of mundane life, subdued by the tranquil exteriors of suburban living. To Oates, man becomes fragile when exposed to dissociated conflicts that affect the stability in building up the personality. Her writings substantiate the prosaic and unwonted reality of life in America, bound with violence, aggression and implausible relationships. She believes that the personality of human beings results from the cogency in comprehending the uncertainties and anxieties that life imposes.

Wonderland is a gothic fable that portrays the dearth of equanimity regardless of the possession of affluence and extravagant knowledge. The life of the characters in the novel is, as the protagonist Jesse states: "[a] movement into the infinite [...] or it is a shrinking back" (Oates 106), which resonates with the quaint events queerly remarked by Carroll as: "For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible" (9). The novel thrusts the readers into swirling events and

Jesse travels through the ubiquitous mystery called life, which is an escapade – iridescent, deft and rigid. The cognizance of the situations that put Jesse under pressure would disclose the intertextual drifts that run throughout the novel. He is in a state of uncertainty and the question “*But what do I do now? What now?*” persists (Oates 45). Alice in Carroll’s work feels the same when she falls into the Rabbit hole unable to find her way back home. This throws light on how human beings linger in the past, by wavering in the present and developing the existential angst when dealing with the upcoming events in life.

Jesse’s life is the microcosmic display of the disruptions and delinquencies of social institutions. Oates goes beyond the sociological implications and the limitations of such institutions. She applies a kind of conflict theory and provides implications and perceptions to cope with the transforming human life. The ethnocentric approach to the traditional family has been shattered with the rapid growth of industrialization. The post-industrial and the post-Depression American society dwelled in the inconsistent economic temperament leading to dysfunctional family settings in the urban areas. The anonymity of the Great Depression and the Wars thereafter and their impact on the victims resulted in making the world a rabbit hole, where “it was too dark to see anything” (Carroll 3).

Jesse in *Wonderland* – Semblance of Episodes

“Curiouser and curiouser,” says Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 15) when she becomes perplexed in the “dream” land. Similarly, life in America, after the World Wars, has been a fascinating spectacle dominated by a feeling of estrangement. America, supposed to be a wonderland, has been a space where adroit personalities encounter situations that create crevices of dream and unreason. Situations are mirages and the characters dwell in a chaotic and insentient environment responding to them impertinently. The trajectory of Jesse’s life with a sense of psychic derailment mirrors the weird experience of Alice in the delusive Wonderland narrated as “a good deal frightened at the sudden change, but very glad to find herself still in existence” (Carroll 22). His life, set in America between 1930 and 1970, reflects the

perturbations ensued from the Great Depression and the Wars thereafter. Such a time was marked by an acrid presence of the echoes of the raging counter-culture. Oates vindicates the palpable and psychic replications of reality. As Oates claims in the afterword, the novel “obviously the most bizarre and obsessive, stands out in my memory as having been the most painful to write; the most painful in conception and in execution; the most painful even in retrospect” (507).

Jesse Harte to Jesse Vogel

Christine Brooke-Rose states emphatically in her book *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* that “Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only ‘true’ or ‘another and equally valid reality’” (4). The devastation with which the novel begins evinces the gothic elements of bloodshed, chaos – the happening of an “unreal reality.” Jesse Harte witnesses the burning rage of a man – his father – poured upon his family. Pulled out of reality, Jesse prepares himself for the possible contingencies.

The “gift of living” without a family and being a survivor gets strengthened during Jesse’s stay in the hospital, when the doctor says, “Why are you crying? Living begins when crying leaves off” (Oates 54). The labyrinth, which he enters with Grandpa Vogel, makes his personality fluid. He finds himself in a world that looks “uncreated, so mean” (Oates 43). He is hypnotized by the serenity which brings in him a kind of passivity that makes him accept the isolation. His brain becomes temporarily inactive, and he lies comatose in the dark eluding the memory of being hurt. As a boy, he could do nothing but accept what he was fated to. He becomes agitated when “that silence had been dirtied by words, by an old man’s whining voice” (Oates 56). He learns how to ignore the past from his grandfather, who finds the past (old furniture, old memories) futile. Though he lives for a while with his uncle and aunt, he is left at the Niagara County Home for Boys. His personality was “shrinking rapidly” (Carroll 22), until he got associated with Dr. Pedersen. This “shrinking” scene is an adaptation of the episode in which Alice shrinks and becomes

so small that she swims in the pool of her own tears. Similarly, Jesse feels neglected and victimized by fate and submerged in a state of despair.

Jesse Vogel to Jesse Pedersen

The antipathy that Jesse feels towards life and his problem with memories leads him to a kind of solipsism. His solipsistic attitudes get developed when he becomes Dr. Pederson's (adopted) son. Dr. Pedersen influences Jesse with his arguments that reinforce radical distortion from his past. Jesse capitulates to the preaching of Dr. Pedersen. He reaches a kind of faux redemption that makes him feel the need for familial inclusion. Oates, as Marilyn C. Wesley states, "presents the level of graphic actuality, which contains the characters' often extreme responses to problematic experience" (17). Jesse's mind reverberates with the words of Dr. Pedersen: "a human being must realize himself to become what he was meant to be" (Oates 67).

Being was not as easy as becoming Jesse Pedersen. He becomes mystified by the exceptional memory of Hilda, the subtle and short talks of Frederick and Mrs. Pedersen's deceptive looks. He prays: "Let me be like them, let them love me, let everybody know that I am one of them" (Oates 82). He is careful when it comes to winning Dr. Pederson's admiration. Dr. Pedersen's talks on physiology fascinate him and the basic philosophical questions intrigue him, as Oates claims in one of her 1997 interviews, "Why am I doing this? What is the value of this? What is the purpose of this?" ("Joyce Carol Oates"). These questions are given a simple answer by the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: "that depends on a good deal on where you want to get to" (Carroll 89). Dr. Pedersen reflects on the answer in an elaborate way: "It is easy to die. But not to live: that is not easy, that is the challenge, the strain. To displace God is not easy. To be higher, a higher man, that is not an easy fate" (Oates 107).

When Jesse reads the articles in Dr. Pedersen's collection of "The Book of Fates" and the sections in them, like "Impersonal Fates," he moves between darkness and reality and contemplates what the swiveling life has brought on people. He, like Alice, looks into the hollow space

seeking to restore stability and begin a new sensible life. Presenting himself to be the “man of God” (Oates 111), Dr. Pedersen conquers Jesse’s mind, and Jesse follows his principles of “secular incarnation”: “It was uncanny, how he drew himself up into a boy who was so precise and articulate, who spoke almost in the voice of an older man” (Oates 125).

Dr. Pedersen “interprets reality” for his family. Jesse feels awkward to face Hilda and Frederich. He wonders at Hilda’s ability to recall cascades of numbers. While he tries hard to impress Dr. Pedersen, Hilda attempts to escape from his hold. She goes berserk during one of her competitions and screams at Dr. Pedersen saying: “You want to press me into a ball and pop me into your mouth, back where I came from! You want to eat us all up!” (Oates 139). Hilda’s odd behavior and Mrs. Pedersen’s secretive looks and child-like talks leave Jesse bemused. Furthermore, he intuits the hatred that the other two children have for him, but he enthusiastically amasses the “knowledge” that was transmitted by Dr. Pedersen.

“A Mad Tea Party” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* finds a different interpretation in the novel. The characters feel an acute and ravenous hunger when they cannot escape from the afflicting situations. The phrase “*eat me*” appears throughout the novel and is uttered by all the female characters in different circumstances. This throws light on the authoritarian role of men and on the delusively attractive world in which women live. This is analogous to the “*Drink Me*” and “*Eat Me*” labels that appear on the edibles Alice finds on the table in the curious hall of the wonderland, and upon consuming them she “shrinks” and “overgrows” rapidly. Jesse believes that his spirit radiates because Dr. Pedersen was correcting the “freakish twists of fate” (Oates 95). He did not realise that while he was “growing,” consuming the enigmatic knowledge of Dr. Pedersen, others (Mrs. Pedersen, Hilda and Frederich) were ‘shrinking,’ belittling themselves and glorifying Dr. Pedersen.

Suddenly before Jesse could become what he wanted to be, Mrs. Pedersen reveals the truth. In a frenzy, she says that under the mask of a famous surgeon – “correcting defects of nature, modifying certain freakish twists of fate” (Oates 95) – Dr. Pedersen was a morphine addict who hypnotized people. She tells Jesse about incidents that were recorded in

Dr. Pedersen's "secret ledgers." The "control," she says, he has on his family has been eating them up. She states that: "I will die if I don't escape [...] It's for the salvation of my soul" (Oates 166). Jesse recollects how Hilda went mad and uttered in extreme anxiety: "Father wants to kill me. *Eat me*" (Oates 139). This makes his familial episode a dream in reality, and, finally, Jesse is rewarded with abandonment for knowing the terrible secrets about Dr. Pedersen:

"Jesse:

With this check and with this letter I pronounce you dead to me. You have no existence. You are nothing. You have betrayed the Pedersen family, which accepted and loved you as a son, and now you are eradicated by the family. Never try to contact us again. You are dead. You do not exist.

Karl Pedersen, M.D." (Oates 186)

Jesse Pedersen to Jesse Vogel

Mixed with a turbulent past, Jesse becomes Jesse Vogel – "He had changed his name to Vogel in 1945. Jesse Vogel. Then end of war, the beginning of Jesse Vogel" (Oates 195). This new beginning soon becomes repetitive and tedious. His life and love demand rescue, he has debts and his landlady, Mrs. Spewak, employs him to do her chores. But these conflicts do not deter his fierce passion to be a "higher man." He resists people because "[t]here were other parts of his brain, dim and insoluble, unfathomable, where other Jesses existed, sinister and unkillable; and he accepted them, he could not rid himself of them" (Oates 193). This is the replication of Alice who tries hard to explain "who she is exactly" to the characters in wonderland. Even Jesse's love for Ann-Marie makes him feel emotionally fatigued, and they break their relationship in an unofficial way.

Fortuitously, Dr. Monk, fondly called Trick, with his maneuvers stirs up the darkness in Jesse. However, after recognizing his talents, Jesse admires him. Trick makes him speak out all his darkest thoughts and Jesse, opening up to Trick, says: "I'd like to be a presence that is invisible, impersonal. I don't want any personality involved – where there's personality everything is confused" (Oates 213). Trick is more like the Cheshire Cat that leads Alice to the Queen. Trick, though jealous, helps

Jesse unite with Helene, Dr. Cady's daughter. Trick's association with Jesse has a mirroring effect. Unlike Jesse, Trick actualizes reality and drops his career to become a poet who writes about ungainly real experiences. He does this to maintain his sanity.

Meanwhile, Dr. Cady's influence changes Jesse's life. Dr. Cady, unlike Dr. Pedersen, proclaims that: "a man doesn't exist simply in his skin, so that we must go around touching everyone" (Oates 240). Jesse wanted to be like Dr. Cady, and he ponders over: "How to become that man without debasing himself?" (246). Jesse's expressionless brain gets attached to Dr. Cady's theory of reality. In his letter to Helene, Trick affirms that Jesse is a dangerous man. Besides, Trick also attempts to lay his death on Jesse on the eve of Helene and Jesse's wedding, with his inflaming letter and poem. The words in his poem haunt Jesse, who is already enraged. Helene provides solace not realizing the "darkness" that was dwelling in Jesse. All that Jesse projected to be his "self" was to satiate his ambitious needs. Helene realizes what Trick meant, only when she starts to judge Dr. Cady and Jesse.

Reasonably, Oates's "daemonic drive and enormous writing energy" brings to surface the materialistic structures that embellish reality with elements of the gothic (Bloom 6). Helene's trepidations about pregnancy reflect the insecurities and deep-seated threats experienced by the American women. The intertextual weaving could be identified even within the text where Helene simulates Mrs. Pedersen and Mrs. Harte. She feels lost and infuriated by her pregnancy (like Mrs. Harte). The table on which she lies for diagnosis agitates her. She develops a similar kind of silence as Mrs. Pedersen, thinking about the kind of person she wanted to grow up into. She finds it difficult to sleep, and she replicates Mrs. Pedersen's feelings that to be loved – to be truly a woman – "she must be touched, loved, completed by a man and made over into a woman" (Oates 272). The Duchess in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* reflects this idea as: "'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!" (Carroll 132).

On the contrary, though it seems to be a bodily change, the swollen belly reminds Jesse of Willard Harte's rage. It was his mother's pregnancy that brought out the rage in his father. Jesse becomes disconsolate and redirects his emotions towards intellectual aspirations. This way, as G.F.

Waller asserts: “Oates’s work reveals her to be among the most sensitive recorders of the intellectual, social and most important of all – the emotional dynamics” (2). Oates portrays the inflated authority of patriarchal intellectuals. Helene finds it absurd when Dr. Cady, Dr. Perrault and Jesse talk about the brain as something tangible – a machine – that could be mended and operated. They knew how to ‘repair’ the brain from the damage and make it ‘work.’

Dr. Perrault who seems to differ from both Dr. Pedersen and Dr. Cady shares common interests with Jesse. To him: “People live. People die. But in between, in between these two states, they cry out against nature itself, they are obscene and most destructive to a happy interpretation of the universe” (Oates 321). He reiterates the idea of the phantasmagoria by defining personality as “just a tradition that dies hard” (Oates 352). Jesse absorbs the disdain that Dr. Perrault has for human relationships and steers clear of conservative feelings: “his mind filled up with Perrault’s words, Perrault’s grimaces, Perrault’s soul” (Oates 396). Jesse’s adultery with Reva Denk and his contradictions with Dr. Perrault disturb him.

Jesse realizes the truth in Dr. Perrault’s words: “Life is pain. Pain is life” (Oates 325). Jesse blends the doctrines of three different people (Dr. Pedersen, Dr. Cady and Dr. Perrault) and never indulges in the analysis of his real “self.” Under the sway of their influence, Jesse becomes resolute when at work and his intentions and transformations seem to be camouflaged under his ‘noble looks.’ He is conceited, and his authority supplants his anxieties. Nevertheless, he becomes vulnerable when he receives letters from Shelley, who ran away from the Vogel family to find solace. His self-assured hubris collapses with Shelley’s observations of her overpowering father. He has not only oppressed others, but also becomes a victim of self-assertion.

Shelley, Jesse’s daughter, is inevitably antagonistic to his obsessive work ethic. Shelley’s letter reveals her unflinching effort to get Jesse Vogel out of her mind and the angst she feels throughout her life. She writes about the nightmares and the mental agony that distracts her sleep – “Noel says, waking me out of bad dreams: You’re only imagining Pain, Shell. Pain is a fiction” (Oates 409). She writes in one of her letters:

When I was nine years old Grandfather Cady gave me a large illustrated copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice's Adventures through the Looking-Glass*. I sat up with it on the table before me [...] trying not to feel terror [...] I would close my eyes in a panic and feel you dragging me through the air. (Oates 421)

Shelley's letters trivialize the convincing opinion that Jesse held of himself – a “protective father.” Having imbibed certain authoritarian aspects from Dr. Pedersen, Jesse ‘interprets reality’ for everyone around him. He becomes sullen thinking about Shelley, and his work mechanism gets hampered. He feels the need to “rescue” his daughter. The letters that she writes are vital in understanding Jesse's transformations. The ambitions that he had developed made him an autarchic human. But now, he becomes obsessed with familial concerns. He even feels that “[a] father could wipe out everything he had ever done and be free” (Oates 487). This resembles the homicidal act of Willard Harte, his father. This can be studied in parallel with the Queen's statement in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* who proclaims that anything that had a head could be “beheaded.” Jesse feels that the supremacy he holds can precipitate as well as dissolve any event in life. He forgets his disabilities (like the Queen of Hearts) and is offended by Shelley's letters. Shelley, like Alice, who dares to proclaim the Queen of Hearts and her admirers to be a “mere pack of cards,” enunciates her inner conflicts uncontrollably. In consequence, Jesse tries to dissuade Shelley from the frenzy set against him. But all his efforts go vain.

Subsequently, Jesse becomes the “devil” obsessed with the “darkness” he was afraid of. His urge “to be seen” consequently distances his “self” and others from him. The phantasmagorical world he enters does not provide him solace but takes him into the unfathomable ocean of chaos. The utterances exhaust the readers and make them understand that everything is confused when the mind is afflicted with a proclivity for personality. Similar to Alice's struggle to define what and who she is, Jesse becomes a “camouflaged personality” and has very little to define him. The way in which Jesse argues with Noel, his daughter's lover and a

drug-dealer, resembles the trial scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, where Alice tries to prove her innocence.

When Jesse finds Shelley in Canada, she is hesitant to talk to him and says: "Don't let him talk to me, Noel – he'll get inside my head again" (Oates 500). Both Noel and Shelley fear Jesse, who appears to be a "devil." Jesse tries hard to prove his innocence but is enfeebled because of his daughter's rage and his irksome life. His vaulting ambition makes him so reckless that he does not realize the devastation he has cast on people around him.

Personality – A Vain Pretension

Jesse wanted to be loved, but he is betrayed by his grandfather who shattered the silence with words; by Mrs. Pedersen who spoils the fierce, powerful and reliable love he had for her; by Ann-Marie who did not deserve his love; and the frantic Helene who is unsure of what she has become. He feels something for Reva, but she, a foil to other women in the novel, deceives him for her benefits. She leaves Jesse mad and brings to surface his darkest fears. Women and their personality frighten Jesse and he cannot figure out their thoughts. Apparently, the conversations in the novel reduce brain and soul to mere mechanisms that can be "operated." Even pregnancy, a moment of hope, is loaded with fury and abhorrence. Willard Harte's homicidal act and Helene's dilemma and violent behavior are the evidence of this condition. Oates magnifies the consequence of radical isolation, where even ordinary activities seem to depress and make the characters feel surprisingly vulnerable.

Jesse's inability to actualize his "self" and the effect of it can be relatively understood in light of Abraham Maslow's theory. Maslow's hierarchy of needs extends an untarnished perception of Jesse's innate curiosity. Jesse's pursuit was to reach the status of a "higher man." Hutcheon points out that: "In fact, it was Freud who conferred on narcissism the status of the 'universal original condition' of man, making it the basis of more than just pathological behavior" (*Postmodernism* 1). Jesse's past filled with deprivations leaves him with a shortfall of love and belonging. Dislocation and homelessness leave him shattered, and they

intensify the need for compensatory activities. The deficit of love drives him toward actualizing his will – to bear an autonomous identity, but he embraces “unconscious self-actualization,” which has an adverse effect on him.

Due to frustration and insecurity, he becomes the shadow of people with positive self-actualization, seeking and coercing his future to be established. Though his basic needs are fulfilled, he feels compelled to accomplish his psychological and self-actualizing needs, but his dissatisfactions affect his motivation. He becomes a neurosurgeon not because of his own dynamism but due to external initiatives. He loses his autonomy, and, instead of systematizing his will, he tries to emulate the inclinations of others. In turn, he is destroyed, and the uncertainties caused by the insubstantial motivation prevent him from attaining homeostasis. In fact, he inadvertently neglects his autonomous self and undivided personality. Accordingly, Maslow’s theory finds multifarious and inter-linked expressions in the novel.

Jesse’s grotesque insanity is a result of the flamboyant estimations about humans who (according to Dr. Pedersen’s doctrine) drain energy and remain forever in the unfathomable parts of the brain. The novel projects the illusions behind the superficial personality. Jesse does not possess merely one personality, but rather a diffusion of different personalities. He synthesizes Dr. Pedersen’s “self-incarnation,” Dr. Cady’s “invisible mind” and Dr. Perrault’s “existence.” Oates interprets personality to be abstract and illusionary, and building up a personality can be seen as an inclination to cover up the disability of articulation and the fear of being unrecognized.

Human fate exposes Jesse to such quirky individuals, and their ascendancy makes his own personality eccentric. Like Alice, who encounters mysterious figures in her dream world, Jesse moves amidst the representative figures whose ideologies lead to his metamorphic transformations and who eat up his mind without his knowing. Jesse, born as Jesse Harte, educated as Jesse Pedersen and later living as Jesse Vogel, reflects the flummoxing personality that Alice experiences when she says: “who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!” (Carroll 19). Evidently, Oates adheres to what Miola calls “Paralogues.” The utterances

in the novel furnish historical and social significance, featuring phantasms related to personality.

With *Jesse*, Oates showcases how the complex reality works in society. The ambitions and the invisible and terrifying influences that Jesse had received from the antithetical patriarchal personalities leave him freakish. The novel extends, beyond imagination, the demonic patterns of life and as Oates writes in her afterword to the novel, Jesse becomes, “a son of the devouring Cronus who, unknowingly, becomes Cronus himself” (Oates 508). Through Shelley’s letters, Jesse understands that he has not created a self but an image of a collaged self. He becomes the man he was afraid of – an intimidating mortal with demonic authority.

Consequently, the novel becomes a duplicate of and has sequential association with Carroll’s work. The thread is woven around the paternal figures who displace women with their ambitious endeavors. Shelley’s questions to Jesse Vogel can be seen as Oates’ attempt to voice the urge to demythologize the supremacy that has been the mark of father figures. Oates locates the novel, reframing Carroll’s work, to accommodate the valid social and historical proposals. Set in a specific era, the novel manifests the agony of America – the Wonderland. Hutcheon states that: “postmodern film is that which paradoxically wants to challenge the outer borders of cinema and wants to ask questions [...] about ideology’s role in subject-formation and in historical knowledge” (117). The same can be traced in postmodern fictions where the voluble prose addresses “the split attitudes of reality” (Brooke-Rose 3). Further, Oates succeeds in the process of *Askesis* by creating a wonderland but has not desecrated Carroll’s wonderland. Appropriately, Bloom’s observation on Oates as “not a political novelist, not a social revolutionary in any merely overt way” but a “true proletarian novelist” is justified (2).

Conclusions

The novel, like a lens, reflects the internal contradictions and diverges the meaning with regard to individual experience. Like Jesse, every human travels with darkness, and, as Mrs. Pedersen states in the novel: “What is buried will surface” (Oates 174). Jesse is illustrative of all those who enter

this world and lead their life with a deformed childhood, shattered and chaotic adulthood and aspire to 'completeness.' The existential problems that human beings face while enduring the stumbling blocks of life impel them to choose between the "self" and the "others," and the novel depicts the conflict in which the "others" supersede the "self." To survive and to be "complete," Jesse heeds the predominance of "others" neglecting his "self" intuitions. In fact, the intuitions never come to surface because of the "overgrown" coaxing of the "others."

In this way, Oates manipulates the need to have homeostasis which would free the self from becoming narcissistic and megalomaniac. Jesse rises to an *Übermensch*, which excludes him from the universal history; towards the end, he descends to a common man and tries to include his personal history into the universal one. He grows and shrinks (both physically and mentally) throughout the novel just like Alice, who, after the spooky happenings, says: "I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing" (Carroll 60). The transformations can be seen as instances that allow the character to venture on his pursuit of identity in a capricious universe. Jesse is, thus, the everyman victim of the American Society.

Subsequently, the intertextual analysis of this exhaustive novel breaks the complexity in marking the phrases that require scrupulous attention. The novel elevates the meaning of the marked phrases by dramatizing the alarming shift in the morality and serenity that America dreamt of. The transpositional change in the sign system with time and the modified linguistic universe (with shift in expression/ meaning) help us observe the counter-culture that demoralized and destabilized the mainstream. Prominently, the language in the novel becomes the object of representation when it enters the realm of multiplicity of discourse, what Bakhtin called "polyglossia." Reiterating this, Bakhtin notes that "a language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages" (141). The plot is an impressionistic historicizing of an era that was discursive and divergent. Oates actualizes the reality by externalizing "personal, private, shapeless fantasies into structures that are recognizable to other people" (Hicks 543). It is her strategic utilization of Carroll's theme that the adapted wonderland, like a

two-dimensional array, amplifies the hatred and discontent and the quest for self that was widespread in America in the 1960s. All in all, the novel evokes a sense of acute pain that leads to the question: “If art had no ‘social truth’ or did not romance with reality, why does it disturb the conscience of a people?” (Nwagbara 6).

Works Cited

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. 1970. Trans. Richard Miller. New York, NY: Hill, 1974.
- . *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York, NY: Hill, 1977.
- Birch, David. “‘Working Effects with Words’ – Whose Words? Stylistics and Reader Intertextuality.” *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics*. Ed. Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. London: Cambridge UP, 1981.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1920.
- Hicks, Jack, ed. *Cutting Edges: Young American Fiction for the 70’s*. New York, NY: Holt, 1972.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1988.
- . *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Johnson, Greg. *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1987.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Maslow, Abraham. *Motivation and Personality*. New York, NY: Harper, 1970.
- Miola, Robert S. “Seven Types of Intertextuality.” *Shakespeare, Italy and Intertextuality*. Ed. Michele Marrapodi. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004.
- Nwagbara, Uzoechi. “Intertextuality and the Truth of Achebe’s Fiction: Militarised Nigerian Postcolony in Anthills of the Savannah.” *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* 2.2 (2011): 1-19.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *Wonderland*. New York, NY: Ontario Review P, 1971.
- . “Joyce Carol Oates, Academy Class of 1997.” Interview. *YouTube* 27 May 2019. Web. 15 July 2020.
- Plett, Heinrich F. *Intertextuality*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991.

- Showalter, Elaine. "Joyce Carol Oates: A Portrait." *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1987.
- Waller, G. F. "Joyce Carol Oates' *Wonderland*: An Introduction." *Dalhousie Review* 54.3 (1974): 480-490.
- Wang, Liheng. "Self and Other – An Analysis of Jesse in *Wonderland*." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 2.4 (2011): 804-809.
- Wesley, Marilyn C. "Mothers and Fathers: The Demotion of the Ideal." *Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction*. USA: Greenwood, 1993. 17-30.
- Wilson, Mary A. "The Image of Self in Selected Works of Joyce Carol Oates." Louisiana State U, 1997. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*. Web. 4 June 2020.
- Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 54.33 (1946): 468-488.