

# A Study on Oates's Gothic Short Stories from the Perspective of Psychological Realism

## -Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque as an Example

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**Abstract:** Joyce Carol Oates is generally been considered as one of the most significant and enduring writers of the twentieth century in America and enjoys the reputation of “the Queen of Gothic”. Her short story collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, ranged from classic ghost stories to portrayals of chilling psychological terror, had won the World Fantasy Award in 1995. Previous study on this book is rather few except some preliminary interpretation on the themes of certain short stories. In this paper the author will analyze the artistic characteristics of the book from the perspective of psychological realism, and discuss the social problems reflected behind it.

### 1. Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates is generally been regarded as one of the most significant and enduring writers of the twentieth century. Since her first novel *With Shuddering Fall* appeared in 1964, over 100 books have been published in the next four decades including 56 novels, 34 short story collections, 8 poetry collections, 9 drama collections, and numerous essays and anthologies. As the most prolific and versatile living writer in America, she wrote most controversy but enduring works in modern times. As the representative writer of psychological realism, Oates is good at penetrating deeply into the “subjectivity” of human kind to expose the social reality. The 16 stories in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* are fine examples of her superb skills. By using typical techniques of psychological realism like stream of consciousness, interior monologue, association, memory, and inner analysis, as well as other modernism techniques like grotesque, symbolism and nightmare, she vividly displays the psychological progress of her characters. While exposing the violence and evil of American society, the writer allowed us to peep into the contemporary American social psychology.

### 2. Theory of Psychological Realism

Psychological Realism is composed of two aspects: psychology and reality. These two aspects work as an indispensable unity and as complement to each other. On one hand, through the psychology of the character, the writer could be able to reflect the reality and objective world; on the other hand, the description of the psychology should conform to the objective world.

Compared with traditional novel, a psychological realism novel has its distinctive characteristics, mainly in the following three aspects:

(1) Combination of the internal psychology with the external reality. Psychological description became the major means and even the purpose of the novel. It abandoned the traditional plot-centered novel pattern and put the character's inner activities as the main structure of the novel.

The overflow of the character's psychology became the basis of plot development. However, psychological description should not be divorced from real life. It is the unity of the subjective reality of internal psychology and the objective reality of external world.

(2) Various means and techniques of psychological description in the novel. By using techniques like interior monologue, sensory impressions, illusion, and nightmare, the author directly represented the inner psychology of the characters, including subconscious activities.

(3) Inclination of using internal narrative point of view. The psychological realism novel often uses internal narrative point of view. The author retreated from the novel and authorized certain character as the narrator, and all the description should proceed from the "central consciousness" of this certain character.

This paper started from the artistic technique of psychological description, analysis will be elaborated on how the above mentioned techniques are applied in the novel and what kind of artistic effects they have achieved.

### 3. Interior Monologue.

Interior monologue is a direct and objective narrative approach to represent the content of character's psychology. It is borrowed from the drama where characters use interior monologue to reveal one's feelings and thoughts. Writers are not directly involved in their characters' psychology; instead, they let their characters speak their feelings out straightforwardly in first-person narrative.

Joyce Carol Oates often employs interior monologue in her writings. In *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, there is a short story called "Extenuating Circumstances". The whole length of the story is a young single mother talking about her own misfortunes, rather to herself than to her unfaithful lover. Here the writer tries to stimulate the original state of consciousness—jumping, disconnected, and shifting of time and space, and leaves an raw, realistic impression on its readers.

The unnamed woman keeps on talking, and from her words we can assume that she was abandoned by her lover after she gave birth to his son, alienated by both her family and friends. Suffering from both psychical pain and mental torment, she was finally on the verge of breakdown. At the end of the story, the woman articulated to us how she managed to smother her child and threw him into boiling water.

*Because after the first terrible pain he would be beyond pain.*

*Because in this there is mercy.*

*Because god's mercy is for him, and not for me.*

*Because there is no one here to stop me.*

*Because my neighbor's TV was on so loud, I knew they could not hear even if he screamed through the washcloth.*

*Because you were not here to stop me, were you.*

.....

*Because he did not struggle. And when he did, it was too late.*

*Because I knew I must not panic, and did not.*

*Because I loved him. Because love hurts so bad.*

*Because I wanted to tell you these things. Just like this. (Oates, 1994:153)*

Oates is good at employing the technique of interior monologue to represent the intense inner conflict and the emotional fluctuation when the psychological world is undergoing great shock or the nerve is under great pressure. In this case, the woman's psychology is convincing and authentic. We can feel the desperation and helplessness between the lines. What she thinks and feels, what she suffers, is so real to us that we can even understand her killing the child, and pity her. Behind all

these seemingly disconnected, lack of logic, and crazy talks, we could actually see a complete picture of the unnamed woman's tragic life. We can not deny the fact that the writer has succeeded in creating a helpless and desperate victim of the society, thereby justify the fact that interior monologue has its unique role in advancing the plot and characterization.

#### 4. Stream of Consciousness

Stream-of-consciousness. As a technique to describe inner activities, psychological realism writers also like to use it as a means to show the complex process of human psychology. Psychological realist regards the inner psychology as an integral part of social reality, sparing no effort to explore the hidden psychological process of their character, but their main interest is to better represent the environment and people in social reality through the vivid activities on the conscious level.

Joyce Carol Oates employed the technique of stream-of-consciousness in several places in the short story collection. The short story "The Doll" is about a mystery story between the heroine Florence and a doll house. Florence received an antique doll house when she was 4 years old. When she grew up, she became the president of a private liberal arts college, and an elegant, confident woman who had no interest in man at all. In public places, she was a popular and charming professional woman, "like an exquisitely precise clockwork mechanism, a living mannequin." But when she was alone, she always bothered by a "most extraordinary sensation of fear, unfathomable and groundless fear" (Oates, 1994:32), and she had difficulty in falling asleep at night.

When she came to an unfamiliar city to attend an important academic meeting, she was astonished to see that "at the top of a stately elm-shaded knoll, her old dolls' house—that is, the replica of it." (Oates, 1994:27) Standing in front of the house, there was a series of intense inner struggle going through in her heart. She wanted to call on the owner of the house. But it struck her that she had no reason, no excuse for being here; At last she was so overwhelmed by panic and fears that she ran away from the doll house. She spent the rest of the day cheerfully as usual, but when she forgot who she was, when she was utterly alone, she was crippled by uncertainty and susceptible to fear. Lying on the bed in the hotel, her mind was racing:

*The luminous dials of her watch told her it was only 10:35. Not too late, really, to dress and return to the house and ring the doorbell. Of course she would only ring it if the downstairs was lighted, if someone was clearly up...Perhaps an elderly gentleman lived there, alone, someone who had known her grandfather.....*

*Should she surrender to her impulse, and get dressed quickly and return to the house?*

*If I do this, the consequence will be...*

*If I fail to do this... (Oates, 1994:35)*

This story is a vivid description of the living condition of professional women in America today. In this increasingly competitive society, women have to bear enormous psychological and psychical stress. They divide themselves into public self and private self, which contributes to personality distortion. In this story, the heroine Florence is a perfect and confident woman in public eyes. We can never know her real self when she is in private. However, by using the means of stream of consciousness, Joyce Carol Oates allows us to peep into the character's inner psychology. The image of successful professional woman is gone; instead, a lonely, nervous, panic private self appeared. How puzzling the human personality is! When with others there is a public self, alone there is a private self, yet both are real. In this case, the two self keeps alternating, allowing us to visualize the complexity of human psychology.

## 5. Association and Memory

Association and memory are important methods of psychological realism. Some seemingly trivial details may generate the character to free association and bring back old memories. They play an important role in revealing the characters inner psychology. In the collection, there is a short story named “The Bingo Master”, in which the heroine Rose Mallow’s association and memory run through the story. Rose Mallow, an intellectual woman of about 39, was once “the most promising young writer in her circle”. One evening, she entered the bingo hall to “intend to divest myself of my damned virginity”. (Oates, 1994:52) She noticed the bingo master Joe Pye, who was a handsome but quiet vulgar man. She found him ridiculous but determined to get rid of her virginity.

As the bingo game began, her memory rushed back to two month before her 39-year-old birthday when she first got the idea of losing her virginity as a present to herself. She was writing to some of her friends, because she was “the one who would continue to write cheerful letter after letter even when she wasn’t answered for a year or two.” (Oates, 1994:54) From her first memory, we could deduce that she was a lonely spinster without any friends. The sad part is that she wasn’t even aware of it.

The second memory was the first Thursday night. She went to a single bar, surprisingly found out that “no one older than twenty-five, no one dressed as she has.” (Oates, 1994:55) Then she retreated and went to the downtown library. From this memory, we could purport that she was an intellectual woman who barely enjoyed any social life, had no idea of what’s going on around her. The third memory was about the second Thursday night she spent in Park Avenue Hotel, where she intended to “prowling about for a man”, but ended up with having dinner with her old friend from school and her husband.

In this story, Joyce Carol Oates told her readers a nightmare adventure of a spinster, who was trying to get rid of her virginity, ending up being deceived by a cunning bingo master. Oates posed this story in depth by using memory and association to reflect the psychological reality of a woman. Through the heroine’s unconsciously recalling the past, we could see much more beyond her intellectual and respectable appearance: despite her success as a writer, she was desperate for love. She had no friends, no social life, no experience with man, and was willing to win a little bit love and care at all cost, even if the man was a clown like Joe Pye, the bingo master. Through her personal experience in higher education institutions and her unique aesthetic perspective of a woman, Oates successfully demonstrated the spiritual emptiness and psychological perversion of modern intellectual women in America today.

## 6. Inner Analysis

Different from internal monologue which completely rejects the intervention of the writer, inner analysis entails the existence of the writer. Inner analysis is a technique of psychological description which the writer involved into the inner activity of the character, using the third-person narration to generalize the thoughts and feelings of the character. The writer’s interest is totally on the character’s psychology, therefore, the writer’s narration always focuses on the central consciousness of the character. The readers are allowed to involve into the inner activity of the character to feel what he or she feels.

In the story “The Model”, Joyce Carol Oates adopted inner analysis to demonstrate the thoughts and motives of the character. The story is completely developed through the central consciousness of the heroine. The parent less child Sybil Black was brought up by her aunt, who told her that her parents were killed in a car accident. One day, she came across a gentleman—Mr. Starr who offered her a lot of money to be his model. Day after day he was generous to her and

inquired about her family background. Sybil had a feeling that her father was back. To discover the secret, she secretly opened her aunt's drawer and found a newspaper clipping. It turned out that Mr. Starr was her father, and he murdered his wife out of jealousy. From that moment she detected the truth, Sybil's whole world collapsed. Oates analyzed her inner activity like this:

*But she hated him so. And Aunt Lora hated him. And, hating him as they did, how could they protect themselves against him, if he chose to act? For Sybil had no doubt, now, her father had returned to her, to do her harm....*

*Sybil reasoned that, if she told her aunt about Mr. Starr, their lives would be irrevocably changed. Aunt Lora would be upset to the point of hysteria. She would insist upon going to the police. The police would rebuff her or, worse yet, humor her. And what if Aunt Lora went to confront Mr. Starr herself? (Oates, 1994: 142)*

Like a calm observer, Oates used faithful language to record the feelings and reaction of a young girl after the revealing of the big secret. The hatred for her father, the sadness for her own misfortune, the missing for her mother, the love and protection for her aunt, all these intense feelings mixed together in a seventeen-year old girl's heart. At last, she decided to do what she has to do. She took a sharpest knife and hid it in the expensive kidskin bag Mr. Starr gave her and got into his limousine. "For a moment, her mind was blank. She might have been on a high board, about to dive into the water, not knowing how she'd gotten to where she was, or why. Only that she could not turn back."(Oates, 1994: 144)

In this story, through the writer's detailed analysis of the central consciousness of the character Sybil, the reader could trace the whole process of the character's psychology. And through the observation of the character, the truth is gradually revealing. Sybil's psychological change from suspicion to conviction, from hope to despair, all was displayed in a logical and clear way. Especially when the inner conflict was most intense, the technique of inner analysis could be able to indirectly present the character's inner world in a logical way. Therefore, inner analysis plays its own function in psychological description.

In conclusion, the short story collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, as a representative of Oates' late works, is a typical psychological realism work. In this work, Joyce Carol Oates takes great pains to reveal the characters' empty spiritual life and complex inner activities to indicate the living predicament and spiritual crisis of modern man. She adopted her unique aesthetic perspective to de-familiarize the society, and employed the surrealist methods to describe the social reality, all these reflecting the psychological realistic features of her creation.

## 7. References

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