

## **I. Joyce Carol Oates and the Issues of Women in her Writings**

Joyce Carol Oates deals with the issue of violence in America, generally brutal, sadistic violence in her writings. Her tendency to focus on this kind of violence in her prose has shocked certain audiences and on more than one occasion aroused the question, often intended disparagingly. Yet Oates has steadfastly refused to avert her gaze, explaining that an American writer naturally writes about things that happen in America. Violence occurs hourly between Americans at home and against others abroad; it occurs both within our dreams and in our lives.

Violence also happens regularly in the spaces between our dreams and our lived reality—in the realms of art and the media. It is very obvious that violence is an epidemic in America. Oates does not find there to be any gender specifications within that job requirement and responds with anger to the prejudice she encounters from others who feel that writing about violence is not a woman's place. Oates writes about violence not to shock her audience, but to acknowledge and make us aware of the actual conditions of the society in which we live. In her recent collection of short stories, *Faithless: Tales of Transgression* (2001), a collection reviewer Sienna Powers was tempted to name Oates's "most perfectly rendered work to date" (453), Oates depicts the harmful violations that occur in everyday life within partnerships, families, communities, and the nation; she vividly exposes the emotional and physical violence occurring daily between lovers, friends, the patriarchs of society and those they are supposed to protect, and between the individual's own id and his or her self. In this collection, Oates continues her practice of portraying how emotional and physical violence affects its usual victims, women and

children, but in certain stories she breaks this mold as well. In *Faithless*, Oates departs from the norm by also examining female initiated violence.

Incidents of female initiated violence cause social discomfort and so are often ignored by the public or sensationalized by the media. One reason for this is that evidence of aggression in women disrupts a primary cultural belief about gender—that aggression is a masculine trait and a fundamental marker of masculine/feminine difference.

According to traditional gender norms, women are not naturally aggressive, only men are. Therefore, until recently, female aggression and violence have been deemed abnormal, even bizarre, by both specialists and the general public. For feminists, contemplating the negative, sadistic aspects of certain types of female aggression and violence can seem counter-productive, detrimental to feminist aims. The realities of female aggression and violence must be explored however, and in an evenhanded manner, in order to dissolve stereotypes designed to reinforce gender inequality, such as the ideas that aggression in women is unnatural and that any woman who behaves violently is “hysterical” or psychotic. These premises create unequal experiences for men and women in the military, in the judicial system, in the sports world, and in the world of medicine and social services, to name a few.

Joyce Carol Oates stories depict female initiated aggression and violence. How our culture conceives of, explains, and portrays female aggression and its bedfellow, female violence, and how women respond to cultural portrayals of female aggression/violence are Oates’s prominent concerns within four short stories from *Faithless*: “The Vampire,” “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent.” These stories, originally published during the late 1990s and in the first two years of this century,

appeared soon after a handful of feminists had begun to seriously focus on and publish works concerning female violence and aggression, aspects of femininity historically overlooked by scholars due to long standing stereotypes regarding the non-aggressive “nature” of women. Oates focuses a critical eye on the perpetuation of these gender stereotypes in “The Vampire,” a story about one woman’s aggression and supposed victimization of men told from the point of view of two male witnesses. In this story, Oates alludes to *Dracula*, *A Fool There Was*, and numerous other texts from the past and present, all produced by men, which respond to and re-represent incidents of female aggression. By doing so, she reveals how male authors often demonize aggressive women for stepping outside of expected gender norms and threatening the patriarchal order. In contrast, “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent” portray female aggression and violence from the perspectives of various female characters, including one character who is driven to an act of pathological violence, one who witnesses an act of female initiated domestic violence, and another who becomes seduced by American culture’s obsession with gun violence. In these works, Oates explores how western culture’s negative conceptualization of female aggression/violence affects women’s understanding of their own aggression as well as their chosen modes for expressing aggression. Oates also demonstrates in “The Vampire,” “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent” a keen understanding of what social circumstances trigger aggressive emotions in women and how the realities of female violence differ from artificial representations of female violence depicted in past narratives and by the contemporary popular media. It is important to point out that Oates accomplishes all of the above without applauding female violence; she is careful to reveal the psychic emptiness experienced by women

when they inhabit certain pop culture, largely American, models of violence—models that, once appropriated, can breed pathological behavior.

The research defines the archetype of the Lethal Woman, a figure that embodies negative conceptions of female violence and aggression, and outlines the succession of Lethal Women figures appearing in folklore, fiction, and film throughout the ages. The chapter goes on to examine Oates's "The Vampire" and discuss how in this work, Oates exposes the sexism and androcentric motives behind the creation and perpetual reinforcement of the Lethal Woman archetype. Similarly it focuses on the stories "Lover," "Gun Love," and "Secret, Silent," all of which explore the psychological impulses behind female violence and other more subversive methods utilized by women for handling their aggression. Oates's means of depicting female violence and aggression, as her works offer a refreshing alternative to historical and contemporary narratives involving stock Lethal Woman characters, including the currently popular oversexed and overly sexy Seduce and Destroy figure. Questioning the legitimacy or normalcy of female aggression is similar to questioning the normalcy of Oates's tendency to write about violence. It is "insulting," "ignorant," and "sexist" (35). Nonetheless, the general perception is that women who behave aggressively or act violently are freaks who are "either trying to be men or just crazy" (Campbell 144).

Joyce Carol Oates contributes to a recent ground-breaking trend by focusing a fresh eye on female initiated aggression and violence. It is appropriate that Oates has decided to address this issue in her fiction. She has always been a "woman writer" unconcerned by gender norms, and unafraid to write aggressively. Joanne V. Creighton expressed her uneasiness regarding the lack of positive female role models in Oates's

fiction. Among other complaints, Creighton noted that few of Oates's female characters were sexually liberated: "Sexuality is the ultimate reality for men and women in Oates's world, and women pay for their professional success with precious coin, their stifled sexual identities, and in so doing, they assure their perpetual non-liberation" (156). In Creighton's opinion, Oates does not offer an alternative model for the sexually repressed working woman other than the passive, careerless woman who is just as likely to be rendered sexually repressed by her extreme selflessness. According to Creighton: "The characteristic Oatesian woman sits around waiting for something to happen [. . .]. Oates's work offers a disturbing view of women's incapacity as a group to deal successfully with their sexuality and as a result with experience" (Creighton 156). More than twenty years after Creighton made these observations, Oates published "The Vampire."

In this story, the "vampire" is a woman named Janessa, and although this character is successful professionally and has no trouble expressing her sexuality, she could not be deemed a positive role model by any stretch. Janessa is not a vampire of the immortal, blood drinking type, but rather a seductress who aggressively charms her way up the social ladder of the art world, sucking up to men of prestige along the way and using her association with one famous artist in particular to gain public prominence. Janessa marries Carlin Ritchie, a famous, terminally-ill West Virginian artist, whose folksy, Appalachian inspired style of painting and silk screening has hooked into the nation's sentimentality for the disappearing natural beauty and the rustic lifestyle of simpler times. Janessa uses her marketing savvy to force her husband's art into public consciousness until he becomes a pop culture icon: a man with weathered, wizened, Willie Nelson-esque charm; a tender, eccentric, masculine Georgia O'Keefe. Janessa

vigorously promotes her husband's public persona as well as his work and urns his life into a photogenic impersonation of his Appalachian roots. She eventually sneaks her own photography and carefully crafted identity into public consciousness as well. Being renowned artist Carlin Ritchie's wife—his young, beautiful, sumptuously-bodied wife—Janessa easily makes herself rich and famous after her husband's death by becoming Carlin Ritchie's "artistic collaborator."

Janessa, who enthusiastically crafts her and her husband's identities as artists into consumable products, is ruthlessly capitalist; her eventual plagiarism of Ritchie's own work is completely self-serving; and her sensuality, self-awareness and intense erotic appetite—which seem to steadily increase over time—make her an exaggerated contradiction to the sexually stifled, nonliberated professional women identified in Oates's work by Creighton.

Oates seems to have noted and acted upon Creighton's observations; rather than being passive and sexually repressed, Janessa is sexually and professionally aggressive, selfabsorbed, and dangerous—to men especially—due to her extreme desirability and extreme disregard for others. She resembles the conservative's nightmare of feminism taken to the negative extreme.

If read in isolation, "The Vampire" would be more offensive to Creighton and other feminists than Oates's previous stories involving cowed, inactive, vacuous female characters. The character Janessa is part vampire, part vamp and part femme fatale. She resembles familiar stock characters from folklore, literature, and film that have frightened and titillated male audiences for generations. The female vampire, vamp and femme fatal are all based on the archetype of the Lethal Woman, an archetype embodying sexist

conceptions of women that, to the great disadvantage of women and society, has pervaded multiple cultures for centuries.

But in “The Vampire,” the Janessa we are exposed to is not necessarily the “real” Janessa, since the story we’re told about her is Rafe’s, another of Oates’s characters and Janessa’s “sworn enemy” (*Faithless* 300). It is Rafe, rather than Oates, who believes in Janessa’s demonic identity, and through Rafe’s obviously subjective and highly biased narration Oates exposes and undermines, rather than asserts, the sexist and androcentric ideologies existing behind western reincarnations of the Lethal Woman. Janessa, with her modern Goth fashion sense and her creative media savvy, is a highly stylized character reflecting cutting-edge, contemporary tastes; her role in the public’s consciousness, however, is timeless.

The Lethal Woman archetype has its roots in the folklore and mythology of various cultures. Prior to the nineteenth century she existed in western consciousness as Lilith, Adam’s rebellious wife before Eve. Lilith’s name appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Old Testament*, the *Talmud* and *Zohar*, but popular knowledge of her story comes from Jewish legend. Here, Lilith abandons Adam and then births numerous demonic children with various he-demons. God then orders Lilith back to Adam’s side, but she refuses. He threatens to kill her demonic children if she does not obey, to which she responds that she will prey eternally on her former spouse’s children: “If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.” It is significant that in the *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, Lilith leaves Adam because Adam insists that she assume a subservient role during intercourse: “She said, ‘I will not lie below,’ and he said, ‘I will not lie beneath you, but only on top’.”<sup>2</sup> In the *Alphabet of*

*Ben-Sira* Lilith is demonized, made vampire, because she rebels from male authority and is openly sexually dominant.

A human flesh eater of supernatural proportion, Lilith is one of the first female vampires of western literature. The female vampire, a human-like creature that gains her strength by feeding off of the blood and flesh of mortals, was later a popular monstrosity in Victorian times. She appeared most memorably in Stoker's *Dracula*, but ancient versions of this Lethal Woman include the Greek and Roman legends of Lamia and Stringes, and the figure also exists in Portuguese, Malaysian, Scottish, and Danish folklore. The Philippine *Aswang* is believed to be a woman of great beauty by day and a horrible flying beast by night, and in India, the *Yakshis* is another alluring woman who seduces men and then devours them.

Critics discuss how these female vampires serve a common purpose in the folklore of various world cultures by representing as monstrous female behavior extending beyond acceptable cultural expectations for women. Furthermore, she relates these figures, made infamous within certain cultures largely through oral traditions of storytelling, to the female vampires from literature familiar to westerners today: Although some of these folklore creatures differ so radically from the modern vampire that the connection between folklore and literature is not immediately recognizable, most exhibit at least one of the three characteristics associated with women vampires in literature: bloodsucking, rebellious behavior, and overt eroticism. Thus, they are indirect forerunners and sometimes models for the women vampires who have become an important part of the popular imagination—women who are aggressive, destructive,

rebellious, and, at the same time, irresistibly sensual—in short, everything traditional women were not supposed to be. (200)

For the realistic female “vamp”—the gold-digging, marriage disrupting, seminal fluids draining, all around life destroying femme fatale—no longer had fangs, drank blood, or slept in coffins and so no longer resembled a creature from a fantasy world. This image of the Lethal Woman was easier to transpose onto actual women than that of the vampire. In 1915, *A Fool There Was*, the American film based on the 1909 novel by Porter Emerson Browne, was released. The film starred Theda Bara as The Vampire, and is a vivid portrayal of the vampiristic phenomenon imagined by Kipling: Bara’s character steals men from their wives and children, exhausts them through sex until they are physically debilitated, takes all of their money, and then leaves them, impotent and alone, to wander the streets homeless, commit suicide, or go permanently insane. Her motivation in tracking down and seducing men of notable wealth and social standing is twofold: money and revenge. Born into poverty as the illegitimate daughter of a French nobleman and a peasant, The Vampire’s aim is to bring down all men *and* the patriarchal system, including the women it has appropriated, such as victim John’s faithful, self-sacrificing wife. Bara’s character is presented in the film as having no redeeming qualities; she is an enemy to all of society. Not only does “The Vampire” “bleed” men, but her enthused willingness to deprive another woman of her husband, as well as deprive a young angelic child of her father, makes her the enemy of womankind and innocent children as well.

In general, the femme fatale is assertive rather than nurturing, and she dominates men sexually, economically, and emotionally. She obviously represents women in society

who ignore traditional gender roles and defy patriarchal authority. These are her realistic qualities. Her unrealistic characteristics include that she is all or most of the following: conniving and manipulative, psychopathic, criminal (as an adulterer, murderer, or thief). This is not to say that some actual women in actual society are not criminals, adulteresses, calculating, or insane; that is obviously not the case. The unreality of the femme fatale lies in the image's conjoining of female aggression and the transgression of gender norms with criminality, sadism, mental illness, even a hint of something demonic/supernatural. The image of the femme fatale is the Victorian female vampire made more believable. It serves sexist objectives by reinforcing the fears of conservatives that independent, assertive women are a menace to society. The image reasserts the antifeminist belief that these women need to be controlled and subdued.

Bram Dijkstra and Paula Ruth Gilbert have done a thorough job of illustrating how at the turn of the century, women were increasingly seen as predatory vampires out to destroy both men and civilization (Gilbert 1284). This philosophy still rears its head today, although less overtly than a century ago. Movies like *The Last Seduction* (1994), featuring heartless women like Linda Fiorentino's Bridget, a femme fatale who seduces, uses, then viciously frames and kills her lovers for profit, demonstrate that on some level, we are not too removed culturally from the days of the Victorian era or the days of the silent screen. "The Vampire" is Oates's reminder that the antifeminist sentiments of works like *A Fool There Was* still haunt society today. The image of the femme fatale is an imitation of a fiction. Such issue overtly based on scary stories told to children—becomes believable to adults, how a character born out of the Victorian novel can be

employed for the 21st century and made convincing to one of the most cynical audiences of all time, is Oates's line of inquiry in "The Vampire."

## II. Female Aggression and Violence as a Form of Resistance against Patriarchy in Joyce Carol Oates' "The Vampire," "Lover," "Gun Love," and "Secret, Silent"

In "The Vampire," Oates presents a Lethal Woman character, one based on the familiar images of the female vampire, the vamp, and the femme fatale, in order to expose and explore the androcentric prejudices lying behind the archetype. While Rafe, the story's secondary narrator, portrays Janessa as a vicious spider woman, Oates reveals the antifeminist motives behind creating and presenting to the public images of Lethal women. Her story is strikingly subversive in that it exposes how Lethal Woman narratives and images subvert conservative men's insecurities and fears regarding aggressive women and dramatizes the destructive influence these narratives/images have on male audiences. When Rafe first meets Janessa, she is a "snaky sexy girl," with "nail-polished talons," "a white skinned female in a black velvet gown cut so low her breasts [are] almost falling out" (*Faithless* 295-96). Rafe uses all the traditional iconography associated with the femme fatale when portraying Janessa. One envisions Elvira or perhaps Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, the emblematic femme fatale. Like all femme fatales, Janessa is gorgeous, seductive, and scheming, but she is most recognizably modeled after Porter Emerson Browne's *The Vampire*, the 1915 vamp played by Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was*. Bara, one of the only female sex symbols of the early 1900s, appears heavily made up in *A Fool There Was* and Janessa's make-up resembles the silent screen actor's, her face "pale as a geisha's and made up like a cosmetic mask, flawless—crimson mouth, inky-black mascara accentuating her big eyes, flaring eyebrows [. . .]. Totally phony, but glamorous as hell" (*Faithless* 299). In *A Fool There Was*, Bara's darkly lined eyes and mouth sharply contrast the natural appearance of her

foe and angel-in-the-house opposite, victim John Schuyler's innocent wife. In Rafe's narrative, Janessa has her own opposite in Carlin's ex-wife, who Rafe of course describes as a loyal, self-sacrificing woman. According to Rafe, Ritchie's first wife supported her husband emotionally and financially before he became famous. In contrast Janessa, like Bara's character, is a "vampire." Rafe describes Janessa's "kind" as "mortal men, and women [. . .]. Who destroy others. Suck away their lives" (293). In "The Vampire" and *A Fool There Was*, what Janessa and Bara's character are indeed "sucking" from their victims is clear: money. But both narratives subliminally suggest that the victims' losses also include health, reputation, and personal dignity.

This "sucking" phenomenon alludes to the masculine fear of the castrating female, the vagina dentate. Instead of blood, vamps feed off their victims' masculinity. In *Evil Sisters*, Dijkstra describes how *A Fool There Was* capitalized on the prominent philosophical trends of its day, especially certain pseudoscientific theories regarding women. Not long before *A Fool There Was* was released, "19th century physicians renewed the medieval church father's belief in women's vicious hunger for men's precious seminal fluids, whereas other men, including several novelists and poets, convinced many English-speaking intellectuals that 'every woman [. . .] contained within herself the destructive potential of the woman-vampire, the sexual woman, the woman of death'" (Dijkstra 66). According to this mentality, "The male was a container filled with vital fluids," explains Dijkstra, "and woman, the sexual animal, longed to gather these into her deadly womb" (66). Every time Theda Bara's voluptuous body hovered over John Schuyler's dramatically aged, withered form in *A Fool There Was*, the film's

audience was reminded that the female was the parasite and the male her ravaged host; the host was drained not only of his money but his physical and social potency as well. Oates recreates this imagery in “The Vampire.” Janessa starts out thin in the story but gradually gains weight, while Carlin, afflicted with multiple sclerosis, steadily wastes away. After Carlin’s death, Janessa is positively voluptuous. Through his rifle scope Rafe notices: “‘She’s gained how many pounds since becoming a widow, twenty pounds, twenty-five, not a fat woman but fleshy, ample. Solid’” (*Faithless* 284).

Along with addressing male insecurity regarding female sexuality, Oates’s story uncovers another androcentric motive for creating images of female vampires, vamps, and femme fatales. In film noir especially, the creation and destruction of an imagined female villain often serves to unite divided male characters or to relieve tensions between individual men and larger male-governed social systems which threaten to disrupt emotionally and/or economically profitable homosocial relationships. Order—in most cases, patriarchal hierarchy—is restored by sacrificing a female scapegoat. In “The Vampire,” Rafe demonizes Janessa in order to convince himself and his audience that his plan to murder the “vampire” is justifiable. His motives for murdering Janessa include his desire to rebuild the severed bond between him and Carlin, his mentor/father-figure, and restore the order of their lives before Janessa’s arrival on the scene.

Bernard Dick has made the observation that in film noir, “passion is profane [. . .] and love between men is sacred” (158); the same holds true in “The Vampire.” Much like Rafe, Sam Spade, Humphrey Bogart’s character in the classic *The Maltese Falcon*, steadfastly plots a femme fatale’s downfall to avenge the murder of his friend and colleague, despite his intense physical attraction to the woman. In *Gun Crazy* (1949), a

noir originally titled “Deadly is the Female,” the main character Bart is a well-intentioned misfit stuck in a world he just doesn’t understand, but he knows he loves his gun crazy wife Laurie and will do anything for her. Anything, that is, but stand by and watch her kill his two best friends. At the end of the film, Bart shoots Laurie down before she can kill his buddies. Dick and other film noir scholars have exposed how noir conveys again and again that homosocial bonds are far more valuable than sexual love between a man and a woman (Dick 157). In a homosocial relationship, a woman is an intruder—the one to come between men and cause the disturbance in the social order. This legacy is ingrained in the cultural subconscious, which makes Rafe’s homicidal reaction to his best friend’s death seem almost natural upon first reading the “The Vampire.” A beautiful, sexual woman is to blame for a friend’s untimely death. According to tradition, Janessa must be sacrificed, “sent down,” like *Falcon’s* Brigid, “down into the primordial abyss of the white goddess from which she sprang” (Dick 158).

In “The Vampire,” Janessa represents the female scapegoat recognizable from many works of literature. Murdering Janessa is Rafe’s attempt at restoring the damage she inflicted on his and Carlin’s friendship. Rafe admits to having looked up to Carlin as “‘a saint’,” but after Carlin’s marriage to Janessa, Rafe loses some of his respect for his old friend and mentor. Rafe despises the “‘Disney-type theme house’” built by Janessa and Carlin duplicating Carlin’s “‘family home lost in the Depression.’” It’s “‘bullshit’”—says Rafe—“‘you’d think Carlin would be ashamed’” (*Faithless* 301). He is angry with Carlin for allowing Janessa to market his identity as a “‘primitive Appalachian’” artist in the popular realm and allowing himself to become a pop-icon. That Rafe’s latent anger at Carlin transforms into an obsessive hatred for Janessa is obvious. Rafe tells Harrison,

“‘I’d forgive [Carlin] anything, almost. [. . .] I wasn’t anyone to judge. I never judged him—only her’” (297). Rafe vehemently claims that he is loyal to Carlin in his heart and does not think badly of his friend, only Janessa, but the “‘almost’” in his statement of forgiveness makes these claims suspect, as does his comment to Carlin: “‘Jesus Carlin, it’s like you’re on display, marketing yourself, how can you tolerate it?’,” and his admitting, “‘I was frankly pissed’” (297). Rafe tries to subdue his sadness, anxiety, and anger over losing Carlin and ease his insecurities regarding their past friendship—the primary homosocial relationship in his life—by sacrificing Janessa. He displaces what he feels were Carlin’s flaws, including the latter’s capitalistic marketing of himself and his art, onto Janessa. By planning to murder Janessa, Rafe also attempts to exorcise the guilt he feels for being angry with Carlin before his friend’s death.

Murdering Janessa is furthermore Rafe’s attempt at restoring the social order—specifically, the economic social order—that existed before Janessa arrived on the scene. Janessa disrupts the status quo by imposing her female self between the patriarch Carlin, his legacy and funds, and Rafe, Carlin’s one-time heir within the male dominated art world. Rafe’s anger at Janessa is piqued when, at an awards ceremony at the American Academy in New York, she ignores his efforts to reach his friend, “‘all the while blocking [him]’” from Carlin (*Faithless* 300). The insult continues when on the eve of Carlin’s death, “‘Carlin said apologetically that he’d been thinking, a few years ago, of asking me [Rafe] to be his estate executor if something premature happened to him—‘Laurette was real enthusiastic’—but now of course things were different; Janessa was to be his executor’” (303). The primary reason for Rafe’s approval of Laurette Ritchie and his disapproval of Rafe’s second wife, Janessa, is clear: whereas Laurette supports the

patriarchal status quo of male artist to male artist succession, Janessa disrupts it. That Rafe's hatred for Janessa is in part based on this dynamic is clarified by Rafe's response to the news regarding Carlin's estate and Janessa's inheritance of it: "'This cold, sickish sensation came over me that, to her, Carlin Ritchie was already dead and she was the surviving widow, the proprietor of the shrine, keeper of the legend. Executive of the estate. Heiress'" (306). Rafe's anger at Janessa for disrupting his primary homosocial relationship and destroying the patriarchal hierarchy it assured is a timeless response to aggressive, subversively assertive women.

In "The Vampire," Janessa furthermore represents the economically and professionally ambitious woman whose "masculine" cunning and ruthlessness threatens the so-called Good 'Ole Boy network. As far back in history as the creation of Lilith, society has demonized women who, by shifting the distribution of power along gender lines, disrupt the patriarchal status quo for acceptable male/female behavior. Oates identifies this phenomenon in "The Vampire." As Janessa makes aggressive professional strides after her husband's death, becoming independently wealthy and leaving her identity as supportive wife behind her, Rafe's rage increases, along with his disgust. Jealously, he informs Harrison, "'Now she's being invited everywhere. 'Janessa Ritchie' is as famous as Carlin, almost. Exhibits in Berlin, Paris, London. This exhibit at the Whitney—it's up right now. Go and see with your own eyes. Big features in glossy magazines—*The New Yorker*, *Mirabella*, even *Art in America* where you'd expect the editors to be more discerning'" (*Faithless* 312). Janessa does lie, steal, plagiarize, and enthusiastically market her deceased husband's identity to make her way up the ladder of fame and fortune, which enrages Rafe. But she does not do anything that hasn't been

done before in big business (the Big Tobacco and Enron fiascos are just two recent examples), entertainment, or even in the art world. During the Renaissance, for example, painters are known to have signed off on works completed by their servants and novices. Today, many popular music stars hit it big on the charts by blatantly borrowing other artists' music. Actions such as these are not generally considered ethical, but seldom is someone murdered over them. What makes Rafe angry, what makes Janessa a “bitch” in his eyes (310), is that she is playing the vampiristic corporate game—and playing it well—as a *woman*.

Oates's version of the femme fatale drama recreates the subtexts of those from the past and present. Film critics have adequately discussed how earlier film noirs portraying femme fatales capitalized on men's angst regarding women's increased socioeconomic power, an effect of the first world war. By making Janessa out to be a vampire, Rafe follows in the footsteps of film noir script writers who demonized unconventionally assertive women, portraying them as femme fatales, women who, “While usually possessing a keen intelligence and shrewd cunning...were...totally lacking in morals, [and] bent on satisfying their own lustful, mercenary or violent desires” (Hannsberry 2). Janessa—like the characters played by Sharon Stone, Glenn Close and Demi Moore in the films mentioned above—transgresses gender norms by behaving as an aggressive, self-interested capitalist rather than a passive, self sacrificing nurturer.

Janessa is an updated version of the early 20th century vamp in that she becomes the producer of her own wealth, constructing her own artistic identity and then successfully marketing it. In contrast, Theda Bara's character in *A Fool There Was* remained in the domestic realm and was consistently dependant on her male victims for

financial security. However, Oates's Lethal Woman remains characteristic of Bara's vamp and other Lethal Women from history who were "utterly aware of their unique feminine tools and willing to capitalize on them when necessary" (Hannsberry 2). Like the classic femme fatale, Janessa consciously and effectively performs her feminine gender in order to meet aims that are traditionally masculine: to achieve financial success and social as well as subjective potency.

Rafe portrays her as actively constructing her stereotypical feminine identity after her husband's death: "Janessa was taking photos herself; avidly. From time to time she disappeared to freshen her makeup, which was elaborate and effective; at some point she changed into another black dress, low-cut, taffeta, with a startling slit up the side to mid thigh" (*Faithless* 309). She also collects various image-makers from the media—magazine photographers, journalists, a documentary filmmaker, even Barbara Walters—and directs their portrayal of her, posing as "Carlin Ritchie's beautiful grieving widow," "big owl eyes brimming with tears," while the media "pretends to take this bullshit seriously" (309, 312). Rafe despises Janessa because she intentionally exaggerates her femininity to get ahead, threatening patriarchal boundaries by being simply a woman—something no man can accomplish. Gender norms, the very tools once developed by the patriarchy to keep women from becoming contenders in the marketplace, become Janessa's tools for building her ladder to professional success and fortune. Janessa artificially portrays herself first as a loving and supporting wife, then as the suffering widow of Carlin Ritchie and as a result, becomes a celebrated artist in her own right. Rafe's response is, "It's a nightmare. It's like the media knows what's happening but goes along with it—Janessa's a glamorous woman, they can champion 'an exemplary

female artist' as she's been called'" (312). Rafe's narrative makes us revisit and rethink traditional narratives depicting Lethal Woman figures. In "The Vampire," Rafe is the image-maker and his goal is to represent Janessa as female vampire, vamp, and femme fatale. His motives for doing so and his image-making techniques are familiar. Oates's story is like a strip tease; she engages us by emulating and then undressing master narratives from the past, one layer at a time. Her writing is playful in this way, but "The Vampire" jolts its audience with a sobering ending when the focus shifts from Rafe and onto Harrison, who is representative of a larger, real-life audience of those who feel threatened by aggressive women and changing gender roles. Harrison's personality shift, brought on by intensive exposure to Rafe's rendition of the Lethal Woman myth, clarifies Oates's message—that continuous exposure to negative representations of women can transform an originally innocent, passive audience into active misogynists.

Harrison originally disapproves of his cousin's plan to murder Janessa, but as he listens to Rafe's story, his perceptions change, symbolizing an audience whose resistance to change and fear of strong women create a world of misogyny and gender-bashing. Rafe's narrative occurs over time—a series of days—and as the narrative progresses, Harrison moves from being his own person with his own consciousness to being virtually indistinguishable from Rafe. The line between narrator and audience finally dissolves when Harrison dreams that he *is* his cousin, and that he/Rafe is stalking Janessa, the vampire woman, with intent to kill. Harrison's dream takes place after he has heard Rafe's story in full. The man stalking Janessa in the dream is not Rafe or Harrison, but a collective of both.

Both men demonize and objectify Janessa, both contemplate her “slow sensuous smile. Incisors damply glistening” through Rafe’s rifle scope (*Faithless* 283).

Representative of the conservative, androcentric, and effective author intent on demonizing aggressive women, Rafe has constructed a narrative that has absorbed his audience into his perception of reality. Oates provides commentary on the powers of authorial persuasion when Harrison notes, “That is the way of Rafe Healy, of artists, I suppose—they draw you into their moods no matter how extreme” (290). Harrison describes himself as being “like an empty vessel waiting to be filled” as he listens to his cousin’s story (293). It is significant that Rafe is an artist by profession, and that he crafts ceramics. His narrative artistry is as striking as his ceramic bowls, and his position vis-à-vis his audience is clear. Rafe not only crafts Janessa’s identity with his narrative, he also crafts his audience, represented by Harrison, into an empty receptacle ready to be filled with Rafe’s own version of reality.

Harrison can’t get Rafe’s message out of his head. Even when apart from Rafe, the echo of his cousin’s voice drowns out his wife’s more immediate voice: “It’s as if my conscience is a sheet of transparent glass and I can’t figure out if it’s there or not. If it exists,” claims Harrison (*Faithless* 291). His conscience eventually shatters, and he evolves from being his cousin’s sympathetic listener to being Rafe’s cohort, claiming, “The way Rafe and I’ve worked it through, these past few days, less than a week but it feels like we’ve been together for a long, long time, there are times when murdering another human being isn’t just not wrong but morally and ethically right” (316). “Rafe” and “Harrison” have been together for ages, when read as narrator and audience in the context of the myth of female vampirism. Rafe’s portrayal of a Lethal Woman has

confused Harrison's grasp on reality, contorting his perception of women, *actual* women that appear before him in the flesh. He turns violent towards his wife, representative of all women in his eyes: And I shove her back against the edge of the kitchen table, and she gives a little scream of pain and surprise and I'm out of the kitchen, I'm slamming out of the goddamn room, I'm shaking, muttering to myself words I've never heard myself speak aloud in this house, in such a voice, I'm thinking I've never touched my wife, or any woman, in anger in my life, never in anger like this, like flame, never until now and it feels right, it feels good, it feels goddamned good. (317)

Harrison's violence towards his wife is brought on by her nagging him, her not taking for an answer, her not knowing her place. In the past, Harrison had been a loving husband, respectful of his wife's concerns, but his perception regarding women has been influenced by Rafe's story and, one could argue, centuries of stories presenting transgressive, "unfeminine" women as demonic parasites. The story about Janessa has taught Harrison that a woman allowed too much power in a relationship will suck her mate dry and then discard his corpse, that to ensure their own well-being and that of society, men must work to secure patriarchy and keep women from obtaining power and running rampant. This general idea has existed since the Romans and Greeks altered religious mythology, replacing the Earth Mother with the Sky Father. It rears its head visibly at times, less visibly at other times. In the 1970s and more recently in the 90s, it took shape as the argument that the women's movement caused an increase in serious crime by women. The argument is similar to Rafe's: that Janessa, a clearly economically savvy woman possessing a good deal of power in the art world and in her marriage, is a criminal—a psychopathic usurper and murderer.

The fact is, as women gain more ground socially and economically, they face backlash from portions of society resistant to social change. Narratives such as Rafe's that present images of female vampires, vamps, and femme fatales—like those portraying ignorant Blacks and greedy Jews— have long been used as cultural speed bumps to slow the civic and economic advancement of the traditionally disenfranchised.

The primary ideology behind manifestations of the Lethal Woman archetype is that possessing the trait of aggression is a masculine privilege and that aggressive females, whether they assert themselves sexually, verbally, or physically through violence are unnatural delinquents who must be controlled and contained within the boundaries of appropriate “feminine” behavior. Demonizing aggressive women in fiction and film is one means of discouraging female aggression. This is the phenomenon Oates examines in “The Vampire.” Another means of controlling aggressive women is through objectification. Objectifying aggressive women denies these women their full subjectivity, which, similar to demonizing someone, is a dehumanizing act.

In “The Vampire,” Rafe and Harrison collectively objectify Janessa when they gaze at her through their rifle scope. They first contemplate, “Through the rifle scope, a woman's torso. Shapely breasts, shoulders” (*Faithless* 283). They continue by focusing on her “Slow hip-swaying walk. [. . .] Those solid breasts. Skin that exudes heat” (284). Aiming their gaze at her hips and breasts, the men fixate on Janessa as sexual object rather than human subject. As an object, she becomes easy to kill without remorse. Imagining her head as a “dinner plate,” Rafe/Harrison wonder “whether anyone will hear the shattering” after their bullet explodes through the atmosphere and hits its mark (283). In the minds of these men, Janessa has become as lifeless as one of Rafe's ceramics,

which is fitting, considering that her image in the narrative is as much Rafe's construction as the artwork he creates for a living.

The primary impulses behind the construction of these Lethal Woman characters are similar to those lurking in the shadows behind the image of the female vampire, vamp, and femme fatale: To ease male anxiety regarding female aggression and reaffirm male subjectivity/patriarchal control. Seduce and Destroy characters eroticize female aggression and so undercut its power. Although they have proven to appeal to a diverse audience, they are designed primarily for a heterosexual male audience, hence the short shorts, leather bustiers, and the double entendres voiced by the characters. Many of these characters, when they appear in film and on television, are based on comic book and video game figures. Those characters that do not originate from comics or video games are meant to remind viewers of characters that do.

Generally young men and boys' entertainment, video games featuring female characters allow players to gaze at exaggeratedly sexualized representations of the female form while manipulating the forms' movements. A comic book allows readers a similar sensation of control over its characters—the spaces between frames and limited amounts of written dialogue and narration allow readers to fill in much of the action and plot with their own imagination. As designed sexualized objects, Seduce and Destroy movie and television characters invite the same phenomenon—they represent aggressive, violent women stripped of their subjectivity and primed for manipulation by a heterosexual male audience. The sexy female action hero can at times seem a positive representation of female aggression, but the fact that she is designed to be ogled and/or controlled by a phallic joystick and usually works for a male boss/father figure in the context of whatever

fictitious scenario she is a part of makes her a passive Angel in the House; she is pleasing to look at and submissive to patriarchal control. In Seduce and Destroy narratives, female characters with aggressive personalities almost always work for a male boss/patriarch or are weakened or tamed when they fall in love, reasserting the mythologized necessity for male control over females.

Cultural productions like those cited above further reassert the conservative status quo by indicating that the real source of female power is female sexuality and by deemphasizing aggressive women's intellectual capabilities, making them seem primitive and animalistic.

Oates's presentation of the Lethal Woman narrative illuminates a collection of social anxieties regarding gender, sexuality, male/female relationships and the distribution of power between the sexes, but "The Vampire" most pointedly addresses the cross cultural, cross generational belief that female aggression is unnatural and destructive.

In "The Vampire," Rafe responds to Janessa's aggressive personality by representing her as a Lethal Woman in his narrative. Oates exposes the negative effect this constructed representation of femininity has on male audiences: Rafe's story changes Harrison's perception of women, and he becomes a novice misogynist. But the vampire-woman archetype does not solely influence men. In *Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon states, "a study of representation becomes [. . .] an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past" (7). Negative images of aggressive women affect women as well as men, but on a more personal level; the vampire, vamp, and

femme fatale are images that discourage women from acknowledging their inner aggression. Fearful of resembling these negative images, women disavow an inherent part of themselves when they avoid experiencing and displaying their own aggression. By hiding, camouflaging, or refusing to acknowledge their own aggressive tendencies, women fall in line with culturally established gender norms which posit that women are naturally passive while men are naturally aggressive. In her book *Behind the Mask*, an investigation of female aggression, Dana Crowley Jack explains how the gendered distinctions surrounding aggression support the patriarchal system and work to prevent social and political change:

Aggression is still the bedrock upon which gender dualisms are erected: active/passive, warlike/peaceful, competitive/cooperative, separate/connected, and more. The thought of women's aggression arouses inchoate fears of an unnatural blurring of gender lines that have been drawn by evolution. If women are overtly aggressive, then gender, as our society has defined it, will no longer exist. (30) Jack's explanation relates to Hélène Cixous's theory that "Logocentrism subjects all thought—all concepts, codes and values—to a binary system." This system, Cixous argues, designates activity to the masculine realm and passivity to the feminine, and functions as a basis for asserting "Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself" (Cixous 583-84). The conception that women are naturally passive and men naturally active and aggressive is based on the patriarchal impulse to keep women in non-assertive roles. Language, Cixous argues, functions as an enforcer of this doctrine. The Lethal Woman archetype is another sign constructed to dissuade women from crossing gender boundaries and acting aggressively.

The Lethal Woman archetype serves as patriarchy's warning to men of what kind of monstrosities can occur when women transgress the gender boundary and a warning to women of the consequences of their behaving aggressively. Aggression, of course, can lead to an intent to do harm, and, "What the culture fears, wants to control, and denies is women's intent to do harm. Women give life to the human race. Their intent to do harm is incompatible with their biological function as mothers and their social role as nurturers of the young" (Jack 30). When a female vampire takes a steak through the heart, when a femme fatale is shot down, conservative males in the audience sigh with relief, while female audience members are dissuaded from acting aggressively by subliminal threats of violence, conservative males get threatened.

Besides punishing aggressive women with violence in the pages of literature and on the movie screen, patriarchal forces strive to keep aggression and its extremity, violence, in the masculine realm by depicting women who perpetrate violent crimes as "masculine, monstrous freak[s]" in news journalism and other non-fictional venues (Gilbert 1283). The recent film about the life of serial killer Aileen Wuornos, titled *Monster*, exposes the lie behind this kind of depiction—in the film, Wuornos is shown as having been not a monster, but a woman driven to violence by love, fear, and abuse. Feminists have recently begun exploring and affirming realities of female aggression in sociological studies and texts, but until recently, women have had very few models of positive aggression to follow. Convinced by society that aggression in a woman is monstrous or unnatural, many women repress their aggression, turning it inward, or camouflage their aggression beneath a mask of passivity or performed femininity. These mechanisms for dealing with aggression are insufficient, however; passive aggressive

behavior can go unnoticed and so reinforce feelings of powerlessness in women, as can repressing aggression. Often, repressed aggression only builds in pressure—a sudden trigger can cause it to explode violently and destructively to the surface.

Joyce Carol Oates is attuned to how myths regarding gender and aggression affect women, and in three stories in “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent,” Oates creates female characters who mismanage their aggression by repressing it, expressing it indirectly, and allowing their aggression to build under pressure until it destructively explodes into inappropriate action. Together, these three stories illustrate how women respond with various forms of denial to cultural scripts regarding gender and aggression and how this denial contributes to the powerlessness that many women experience within the social climate of America. Oates’s depictions of female aggressive acts in these stories are hyperbolized, but the author accurately identifies impulses behind female aggression and the modes of expressing aggression women oftentimes adopt in order to avoid outwardly crossing culturally drawn boundaries of “feminine” behavior. The female aggression and violence Oates depicts furthermore offers a refreshing alternative to the images of aggressive/violent women offered in past narratives presenting female vampire, vamp, and femme fatale figures, and to the current trend in today’s media, which is to present female violence as an erotic fantasy.

“Lover” could be read as a narrative about a woman who simply “loses it,” becomes engulfed in hysteria, and attacks the man she once loved. “Lover” in several respects resembles one late twentieth-century Lethal Woman narrative, *Fatal Attraction*, but Oates’s tale is more complex than the film, which demonizes the aggressive female

character, portrays her as insane, and finally punishes her destructive behavior with death. In *Fatal Attraction*, a single professional woman has an affair with a married man. He is a loving father and husband; she is an unmarried, childless career woman. The woman, Alex, represents a modern day vampire-woman. Irresistibly attractive and devious, she seduces Dan and then, after he rejects her, proceeds to try and destroy his life. She threatens to have his child, threatens suicide, and stalks his family. When the Angel in the House, Dan's homemaker wife, metaphorically puts a stake through Alex's black heart, the supportive wife and nurturing mother is rewarded for her femininity, and the transgressive career woman is punished for her aggressive sensuality, her independence, and her relentless demand to be heard.

Oates's "Lover" follows a similar plot. A single woman and married man have an affair and then the man ends it. As in *Fatal Attraction*, the woman attempts suicide in a desperate attempt to reach him but only succeeds in repulsing him. Enraged at being ignored, she turns murderous and proceeds to stalk her ex-lover. Chaos and disaster ensue. But at the end of Oates's narrative, the woman is not killed. She instead experiences orgasmic release behind the wheel of her brand new Saab, her chosen murder weapon.

As with "The Vampire," Oates appropriates the Lethal Woman archetype in "Lover" to address female aggression, but in this case Oates is not interested in deconstructing the patriarchal motives behind negative representations of aggressive femininity. The woman in "Lover" resembles a Lilith character in that she refuses to submit to patriarchal desires, in this case to be used as a sexual toy and then discarded. Like Lilith and Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, the woman makes the decision to assert herself

and be heard; like Lilith and Alex, her behavior is destructive. However, unlike the constructors of the Lilith myth or the screenwriters of *Fatal Attraction*, Oates does not simply demonize her destructively aggressive female character, although neither does she configure her as a hero. Instead, she presents a nightmare scenario that dramatizes passive-aggressive behavior, one means by which women often indirectly assert their desires.

The female character in “*Lover*” is aggressive in that she attempts to trap and destroy her ex-lover on the highway. However, she never once approaches her ex-lover or outwardly addresses her needs, as “Pride would never allow her to risk such hurt” (*Faithless* 48). Her silence indicates outward passivity, while her secret rage is disguised aggression. She wants to hurt without appearing to hurt, her mantra being, “*You won’t see my face. But you will know me*” (48). Passive aggressive behavior involves asserting one’s desires without appearing to do so. It is a means of camouflaging aggression, which is why the method is generally used by women more often than men. In western culture, physical or vocal aggression and opposition is expected of and rewarded in men, while women, fear physical, economic, or emotional retaliation, particularly if they openly express negative emotion or willful opposition to someone more physically or socially powerful. Fear of consequences provides a compelling reason to mask opposition, conflict, or anger. Yet going underground often reinforces women’s feelings of powerlessness and arouses their anger. (Jack 190)

A woman goes “underground” by not shouting when she is hurt or angry. Instead, she may seek to harm or persuade someone through indirect means—by not attending a meeting organized by someone who has offended her or by acting as though she no

longer cares about a person who has upset her while simultaneously criticizing him behind his back. Sometimes noticed and responded to, other times not, passive-aggression is a creative way for women to act out their aggression in a culturally sanctioned mode.

In “*Lover*,” the protagonist goes underground in order to voice her aggression. Oates describes her as having intentionally disguised herself. The woman buys a new Saab, a car in which she knows she will not be recognized, and she watches her ex-lover’s movements, “knowing herself perfectly disguised, her sleekly styled matte-black hair covering part of her face.” Not only has she hidden her features, she has also exaggerated her femininity with her cosmetic mask: “Her makeup was flawless as a mask, her mouth composed, eyes hidden by dark glasses. Her nails were filed short but fastidiously manicured, polished a dark plum shade to match her lipstick” (*Faithless* 51). In this way, she symbolically enacts a process defined by Jack, who finds that “Often [women] deliver hurt to their targets from behind a pastel, pink feminine mask,” a behavior which “meshes with demeaning stereotypes of femininity” (192). The woman in “*Lover*” ostensibly resembles the femme fatale, a “demeaning stereotype of femininity” who uses her feminine allure to disarm her prey.

But Oates depicts a far more realistic and compassionate representation of female aggression in “*Lover*” than is given in works involving femme fatales like *The Maltese Falcon* or *Double Indemnity* (although “*Lover*” does similarly merge themes of violence and sensuality). For one thing, Oates’s character is driven to destructive behavior not by greed or selfishness, as are the femme fatales in the aforementioned films, but by a desire to reconnect with an estranged loved one and to be heard by him. Jack reports that

“Whatever the form, a woman often resorts to destructive aggression when she feels she cannot communicate her feelings directly and have them heard” (46). The woman in “*Lover*” repeats to herself again and again, “*You will know me. You will know*” (*Faithless* 49). She wants more than anything to be acknowledged by the man she loves but recognizes his unwillingness to listen. She also recognizes her respective powerlessness. Her ex-lover, symbolic of the patriarchy with his high powered executive job, his wealth, and his control over their relationship, dismisses her in the story, “detatch[ing] himself like one shrugging off a coat” (48). The woman does not directly confront him with her wishes, but instead passively suggests her desires by acting “suicidal.” When that has no effect, she covertly exerts control by stalking him and plotting his murder/her suicide. Jack indicates that women who feel they have little power in a relationship often assert themselves in covert ways that prevent direct contact with and retaliation from a more empowered party. For many women, passive-aggressive actions are a “safe way of resisting others’ control while attempting to exert their own” (Jack 193).

The woman’s passive-aggressive act in “*Lover*” satisfies her aggressive urge, but her aggression does not hit her target or produce communicative results. Instead, she victimizes a random motorcyclist who moves into her path. The motorcyclist is male, and so a scapegoat, a surrogate for the woman’s lover. After causing him to collide with another motorist, the woman excitedly tries “to contain, to slow, the frantic palpitations between her legs,” indicating that she experiences an intense, seemingly orgasmic release of pent-up aggression. Directly after, she consoles herself with “Next time,” meaning the next time she tries, she will effectively hit her target, her ex-lover (*Faithless* 55).<sup>6</sup> The woman has released an amount of her own tension, but she hasn’t expressed herself in a

way that can be heard, and Oates presents passive-aggression as a temporary solution for relieving aggressive tension, which is similar to how Jack sees it. In Jack's words, passive-aggression helps "ward off the sense that [one does] not matter, that she [does] not exist," but, "indirection often furthers separation, not connection; it rarely facilitates dialogue, change, or reconciliation, because it denies the recipient the ability to engage with the aggressor" (237).

Direct aggression solves conflict, or at least airs grievance; passive-aggression tends to work within a vicious cycle. Sometimes results are garnered by the aggressor, but the target of passive-aggression can fail to realize that he is responding to another's desires, causing him to repeat the offensive behavior unknowingly. In this case, the aggressor must again replicate her disguised aggression, and so on.

This is not to assert that passive-aggressive behavior is completely ineffective, or that condemning passive-aggressive women is fair. As Jack explains, "Throughout history, women have been punished for obvious displays of aggression; they have been forced to camouflage their intent to hurt others, their opposition, and even their positive forcefulness, to deliver their aggression in culturally sanctioned but more hidden ways" (4). Passive aggressive behavior is one of these culturally sanctioned, disguised ways of delivering aggression, and can be a creative means of asserting one's self and taking up space in the social arena, where men often invade and control women's subjective spaces. This aspect of passive-aggression is dramatized in "Lover" by the protagonist's being pushed out of a relationship, a shared space, by her ex-lover. Her personal space outside of the relationship is trespassed as well. Other men besides the woman's ex-lover use the socially condoned authority of their gaze to sexually objectify her, locking her into a

reduced subjective space. They are truckers on the road, strangers in their high, commanding cabs, not readily visible to [the woman], maintaining a steady speed beside her for long tension-filled minutes, peering down at her, at what they could see of her slender body...they were talking to her of course, murmuring words of sweet, deranged obscenity, which she could not hear and had no need of hearing to comprehend.

*(Faithless 50)*

The character claims her own space outside of the boundaries of society's guidelines when she aggressively forces other cars to move around her to compensate for her erratic driving. By pushing others aside and claiming their collective space as her own from inside her Saab and its disguising shelter, she behaves passive-aggressively. Behaving passive-aggressively at least involves action, and so is healthier for women than avoiding aggression altogether. The erotic pleasure the woman in "Lover" experiences following her aggressive actions on the highway is a moment of freedom from the hold her ex-lover has over her, and her feelings of powerlessness, reduced subjectivity, and psychological inertia.

Another of Oates's characters, the narrator in "Gun Love," does not experience such a freedom. In "Gun Love," female aggression is performed, but not actualized. The narrator witnesses patriarchal oppression going on around her—a college acquaintance of hers murders his wife, and her own mother is raped by one man and then murdered some years later by her spouse. The narrator responds by developing an obsessive fascination for guns, symbolic in her mind of the power and security that she feels she and other women lack. She never uses the gun she has against anyone, however. In fact, she behaves passively in all aspects of her life. At one point she says, "Target practice was

like lovemaking with me, sometimes I hit the bull's-eye, but most of the time I miss. There was no logic to it. There was no design. My own wishes had nothing to do with it" (*Faithless* 121). Besides guns, her romantic and sexual passivity is mainly what the narrator focuses on in her flashbacks. Many men, like firearms, pass through her life, and she tends to always be at their mercy.

Guns serve as phallic symbols inside the text and inside the narrator's consciousness. The narrator psychologically connects guns with phalluses, and sometimes literally confuses the two. At one point she feels a jab against her behind: "My first thought is it's a gun barrel, I was going to be shot at the base of my spine!—but it turns out to be Mikal with just a hardon" (*Faithless* 111). Several times the narrator describes being sexually harassed or molested by men and in all instances, guns are involved. Her mother is raped while being held down by her own gun. But instead of developing an aversion to guns, the narrator becomes fascinated by them and the power they represent. Her appreciation for guns resembles one aspect of Nancy Chodorow's object relations theory regarding girls' reaction to the phallus, where "The penis, or phallus, is a symbol of power or omnipotence, whether you have one as a sexual organ (as a male) or as a sexual object [...]. A girl wants it for the powers it symbolizes and the freedom it promises from her previous sense of dependence, and not because it is inherently or obviously better to be masculine" (Chodorow 123).

As mentioned earlier, the narrator's gun fetish represents an idolization of the power—emotional, physical, and political—which the "Gun Love" narrator feels she lacks. Instead of questioning the abusive patriarchal actions she witnesses and experiences and challenging them by asserting herself in relationships and within the

public arena, the narrator aligns herself with guns and men with guns in an attempt to obtain security and some of the power that they hold. In doing this she mimics her mother, and Oates demonstrates how women in America tend to learn passive-defensive behavior from female role models. Oates, however, does not blame women for instilling passivity into their daughters, but instead paints a larger picture of how passivity is ingrained in and demanded of women—specifically, upper class white women—by patriarchal forces. In “Gun Love,” the narrator’s male family members teach her to accept being controlled and sexually used/abused by men. The narrator remembers that as a young girl she was “tickled”—while naked—by her brother with what may have been her mother’s gun. She accounts how her father, after reading about the well-publicized Tawana Brawley case, “Star[ed] at Brawley’s photo saying, this look on his face, ‘who’d want to rape *her?*’,” speaking as if being raped is a compliment or an affirmation of a woman’s attractiveness (*Faithless* 116, 113). After her mother is raped, the narrator’s father coldly responds with “What’s she expect, living alone?” indicating to his daughter that female independence is a dangerous and naive aspiration (116).

Along with female passivity, another prominent issue addressed in “Gun Love” is that of female sexuality, culturally directed desire, and masochism. In the story, the narrator’s feelings toward guns and her behavior with guns resemble Freud’s description of fetish, specifically his finding that “There are some cases...in which the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim” (19). In “Gun Love,” guns and sex are seemingly inseparable in the narrator’s mind. Recounting one sexual encounter she says, “Between us where we touched our skins were slick with cold sweat like gun oil” (*Faithless* 120).

The first time she has sex with another boyfriend is after he teaches her to shoot a rifle. She recounts, “Afterward we made love so hard it hurt in the back of his Land Rover smelling of gunpowder, oil, grease, and aged running shoes” (117). Explaining that she keeps a revolver in a drawer beside her bed she notes, “I liked the idea, it was sort of a sexy idea, that, when I left Mikal to use the bathroom, he’d roll over and quietly open this drawer and see this mean looking ‘man stopper.’ My new custom-order ivory grip, glimmering out of the darkness” (123).

Feminist investigation of the public aspects of sexual expression has, among other points, effectively illustrated that “on one hand, sexuality is one of the most intimate and private activities in which we engage; on the other, it is remarkably public, touched deeply by the collective influences and pressures that assail us from other sides and sources” (Chancer 44). The sexual theme in “Gun Love” is representative of Oates’s tendency to use sexual themes as means of presenting political issues and to expose the inherent political aspects of sex and sexuality in her prose.<sup>9</sup> The fetishized objects in “Gun Love” are representative not only of sex for the narrator but also of the patriarchy’s power over women. The narrator acquires and holds onto guns in an attempt to obtain self-empowerment, but by finding these guns—symbolic of female oppression—sexy and desirable, she reinforces her own powerlessness. The narrator’s gun fetish presents a disturbing insight regarding female desire and American culture’s tendency to eroticize violence. When the narrator remembers that in high school she and her friends idolized a male classmate who murdered his girlfriend and then shot himself, and that “It was a sign a guy took you seriously, if at least he’d twist your wrists until you cried. The sexiest was

both wrists twisted at the same time,” Oates illustrates how women are influenced by the cultural ideal of female sexual passivity (*Faithless* 112).

In “Gun Love,” the narrator’s gun obsession functions as an inverted version of Jack’s mask in that instead of masking her aggression under a guise of feminine passivity, the narrator’s gun love masks her inability to take any kind of aggressive action towards independence. She never acts against cultural codes for “feminine” behavior, but remains nonassertive in all of her relationships with men; her gun love proves an inadequate replacement for genuine aggression, although it does skew her vision, making her unable to sympathize with other women’s victimization or recognize her own. This matches a complaint of Jack’s regarding the masks women wear to disguise assertions of their desires is that “From the inside, the mask obscures the wearer’s vision of the inequities and myths that work to stop her from taking action in the world” (115). At the end of “Gun Love,” the narrator goes along with the patriarchal ethos of oppression by helping her boyfriend get away with a crime, which is not clarified but possibly involves the murder of his wife. He leaves her with his 9-millimeter semiautomatic Glock Hardballer before going on the run. She becomes an accessory, keeping the “beautiful” Glock Hardballer although she knows she shouldn’t (*Faithless* 125). Thus, the narrator’s gun love skews her vision, and she is unable to end her pattern of self-destructive passivity with relation to the men in her life.

The mother and daughter in “Gun Love” are wealthy, unemployed women who continuously ally themselves with husbands and boyfriends for self-affirmation, protection, and economic support, which assures in turn their continued passivity and dependency on male others. The result is that they are victimized and used by these same

men. In contrast, middleclass Karla in the story “Secret, Silent” attempts to sever ties with her spouse and set off on her own, but she fails after her repressed and camouflaged aggression erupts, causing her to lash out with violence.

“Secret, Silent” is narrated by a teenage girl who travels away from home for the first time to interview for a college scholarship. After her father suddenly announces he won’t be able to drive her to the interview, the girl arranges to take a Greyhound bus and lies to her parents, who don’t want her to travel alone, by saying she will be riding with a friend. On the bus the girl meets Karla, an attractive, high-strung woman with a knife in her purse. Karla coerces the younger girl into accompanying her to her home, where they are interrupted in the middle of Karla’s packing up her things by her estranged spouse. In front of her young companion, Karla draws her knife from her purse and stabs the man. “Secret, Silent” is set in the 1950s, and is a story about crossing boundaries. The young female narrator breaks tradition by applying to college—her parents are the children of Hungarian immigrants, are not college-educated, and don’t understand or completely approve of the path decided on by their daughter. Karla, like the younger narrator, is a woman in the midst of defying tradition. Aggressively seeking independence, Karla tries to sever ties with her spouse. She also refuses to act demurely or passively when harassed; when a well-dressed man on the bus makes inappropriate advances in her direction, she verbally humiliates him. Although both female characters quest after a similar goal, they represent two very different alternatives to the passive, feminine role designated for women by society, and Oates contrasts the girl’s positive assertiveness with Karla’s destructive mode of aggression.

By attempting to go to college to study to become a teacher, the young narrator in

“Secret, Silent” begins her move towards independence by fostering her talent for communicating through language. She asserts herself verbally and directly and she is far different from Karla, who at first is indirect and sends crossed signals. Like the woman in “Lover,” Karla wears a mask “of stereotypical feminine behavior” (Jack 237). She misrepresents herself by dressing sexily, like “a showgirl of some kind,” and by acting coy and flirtatious even though she wants to be taken seriously and treated with respect (*Faithless* 189). When she is mistaken for a prostitute and sexually harassed on the bus she reacts with forceful aggression, but the rage she directs at her harasser is an explosive response that contradicts her earlier flirtatious message (dressing in a sexy sweater and stilettos and asking to sit with that man specifically). Disillusioned by men, Karla’s real desire is to be independent from them, but by dressing and behaving in order to attract and please men, her genuine desires are hidden under her socially condoned performance of femininity. Karla also acts as a people-pleaser when approaching the young narrator. She behaves in a sisterly and nurturing manner towards her and asks the younger woman to accompany her home, promising her food and a place to wash up. Really, Karla is afraid of encountering her estranged spouse alone.

When the estranged spouse enters the scene and ruins Karla’s escape plan, she physically attacks him. Karla’s verbal and nonverbal modes of communicating never accurately convey her intentions, and so her violent lashing out seems inevitable, considering Jack’s acute observations that women often turn to destructive aggression when they become desperate and feel unable to communicate their feelings directly and be heard (46). Oates indicates the triggers for Karla’s destructive aggression and they involve her predicament of being trapped in a lifestyle not suited to her and of being

accosted by the consequences that come with living this lifestyle. Karla uses her sexual attractiveness to gain respect and power, but the strategy backfires when people take her projected persona literally. She apparently has tried the role of wife and mother but has ended up in an unhappy, possibly abusive marriage with a possibly abusive husband. Oates describes Karla's house as dingy and permeated by "the odor of rot," with a small backyard, "A space the size of a large grave" (*Faithless* 197). The effect is gothic—the image of Karla trapped in a sinister house represents her being trapped in the domestic realm, a realm that she's unsuited for and which is unhealthy for her. The scenario Oates creates also resembles the trend in film noir of presenting male protagonists trapped within worlds that are sinister, unsafe and over which they have no control. Of course these noir narratives always include a femme fatale who attempts to drive the nail into the protagonist's coffin. "Secret, Silent" counters this motif with a *homme fatale*—Karla's spouse drives her to a desperate act of violence, and then grins at her having fallen (201). By making Karla's trigger for violence her encounter with a *homme fatale*, a man intent on trapping her within a hostile world, Oates explains female violence (in terms of domestic violence or violence directed at a woman's spouse) in a way seldom seen in traditional narratives involving female vampires, vamps and femme fatales. The sensation of being trapped is often used to explain male violence directed at females. In *Detour* (1945), for example, protagonist Al Roberts is blackmailed by Vera, the film's femme fatale, and when he accidentally kills her the understanding is that *he* has been victimized by *her*—she has entrapped him in her blackmail plot and the madness of the situation, which she has created, leads to her murder and hapless Al's guilt.

Karla's character is a chimera of coyness and hostility, propriety and vulgarity, fear and courage, the feminine (in her dress and manner) and the masculine (she attacks with a knife, another phallic symbol). After projecting class and charm, her vocabulary turns profane and she becomes aggressive and violent. Then, after attacking her spouse, she becomes repentant and solicitous. She expresses dual sides, each to an extreme, so that she is constantly contradicting herself. Karla is a nightmarish emblem of the lack of balance and cohesion provided by the binary of male/female, which "carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized" (Cixous 583). In "Lover," "Gun Love," and "Faithless," Oates exposes the missing space for healthy, honest expressions of aggression within normalized conceptions of femininity—the space that culture, with its divisive system for categorizing human qualities between an oppositional, hierarchical pair, does not provide for women. The consequences of this cultural failing are women's repressed, camouflaged, and explosive destructively explosive aggression, all of which are harmful to women and those around them.

In contrast to Karla, the narrator in "Gun Love," and the protagonist in "Lover," the young narrator in "Secret, Silent" utilizes clear, verbal self expression when she reaches her most desperate point. Standing in front of the college dean, bruised and harried after the ordeal with Karla and her spouse, she thinks, "*Tell the man something. Out of pride, you must not fail,*" and speaks assertively, winning her entrance into the college (*Faithless* 203).

Here, Oates offers an alternative to the hostile, destructive modes of aggression expressed by the other female characters in "Lover," "Gun Love," and "Secret, Silent." The young narrator in "Secret, Silent" does not allow her desires to fester beneath a

surface of silence and passivity, but acts in a positively aggressive, verbal way, by asserting herself clearly, directly, and forcefully. Having been “baptized” with Karla, “like sisters [. . .] in another’s blood,” the young girl has witnessed a picture of the terrible consequences that can arise from following society’s dictates for behavior and self-expression (201). She has delved beneath the placid surface of cultural expectations of womanhood and witnessed the lie of “femininity,” reemerging as a self-directing adult.

One interesting aspect of “Secret, Silent,” “Lover,” and “Gun Love” is that in each story Oates pushes established parameters regarding cultural representations of women, violence, and aggression in new directions. For one, her aggressive female characters are not demonized or modeled to resemble femme fatale villains when they transgress gender boundaries and direct aggression and violence at men. Instead, Oates treats these aggressive characters as objectively and evenhandedly as she has been known to treat male aggressors in her prose. In these stories, Oates’s female characters resemble familiar male aggressors from realist or naturalist literature, like Bigger in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Oates’s characters are examined within the context of their surroundings in order to determine realistic causes for their aggression; similar to Wright, Oates critiques the social and psychological forces that afflict her violent/aggressive antiheroes, without excusing them for their behavior. As discussed in the previous chapter, traditional narratives involving female vampire, vamp and femme fatale figures evoke the fatal woman archetype to reinforce the idea that civilization’s survival depends on women remaining under the sexual, emotional, political, and economic control of men. For this purpose, the actual psychological and social circumstances surrounding female aggression are overlooked in traditional works. And aggressive female characters are

highly stereotyped to embody androcentric fears regarding female aggression. Within a different realm of literature, several feminist authors have explored realistic aspects of female aggression and violence in their fiction to a degree, but generally present female aggression and violence as a means of self-defense; rarely do works by feminists depict planned, sadistic, or simply aggressive violence on the part of women. Oates, however, seems to recognize that female aggression, including negative, violent aggression, needs to be acknowledged and examined seriously from within contemporary social contexts.

The depictions of female aggression and violence in “*Lover*,” “*Gun Love*,” and “*Secret, Silent*” furthermore offer a refreshing alternative to a current trend in today’s popular media, which has been to eroticize female aggression and present female violence as heterosexual male fantasy. Oates departs from this trend by depicting aggressive, violent women in their full subjectivity and by presenting female violence and aggression as a contemporary reality rather than a male-oriented fantasy.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a new Lethal Woman, the Seduce and Destroy character, has become prevalent in films, on television and in video games today.

Representations of female aggression and violence like those cited above are detrimental in that audiences, male and female, are directed to equate female violence with sexiness, and don’t realize that the conflation of the two concepts inherently demeans women and trivializes female aggression. In contrast, “*Lover*,” “*Gun Love*,” and “*Secret, Silent*” present images of female aggression and violence that represent the realities of sexuality and female aggression hidden behind the distorted fantasy image of the hot, sexy, fired-up Seduce and Destroy female. Besides identifying ways in which women camouflage, repress, and deny aggression, Oates exposes how female violence is

often linked to women's emotional desperation and is a response to being sexually objectified and denied full subjectivity by men. In "Secret, Silent," for example, Karla seems sexy and confident but is actually a frightened, insecure, and emotionally damaged woman, her identity as a sexy woman largely responsible for her emotional and psychological distress. When Karla contemplates her "lacy red nightgown [. . .] the front [. . .] ripped nearly in two," she is gazing at her sexual identity, "smiling a peculiar smile as if the nightgown were her own mutilated self" (*Faithless* 198). Meanwhile, the narrator in "Gun Love" is a young, attractive blonde who realizes with discomfort that she's perceived in a mostly sexualized way by male society ("blonds are listened to in a way that makes you uncomfortable until you get used to it, but it might be a mistake to get used to it") (116). She also nearly experiences sexual victimization first hand during her run-in with a police officer (115) and is witness to how females in general are viewed primarily as sexual objects by male patriarchs. All of this, at least in part, encourages her to acquire guns for a sense of protection which in turn makes her capable of violence, even if Oates doesn't depict her as committing a violent offense.

Finally, in "Lover," the protagonist reacts to feeling used and objectified—"cast into a fixed, immovable role that does not reflect one's real self"—with her violent thoughts and actions (Jack 48). All of these characters are operating under emotional stress caused by the recognition that they are continuously under male surveillance and perceived through a sexualized male gaze.

Oates does not fictionalize female violence by contextualizing it within a fantasy world setting, and this is another reason for why "Lover," "Gun Love," and "Secret, Silent" are refreshing alternatives to contemporary productions involving Seduce and

Destroy characters. Oates, who has claimed, “I am always concerned with the larger social/political/moral implications of my characters’ experiences” “Correspondence” 482), depicts female violence/aggression as a problematic contemporary reality, rather than a simplistic male-oriented fantasy. “*Lover*,” “*Gun Love*,” and “*Secret, Silent*” are furthermore fictional works that participate in a recent dialogue among feminists across various disciplines regarding how to conceptualize and discuss violent female aggression. Many feminists are interested in acknowledging and further exploring female violence in order to dismantle myths regarding gender that prevent women from obtaining full equality within society. They believe, like Jennifer Rike, that “To deny violence in women by seeing them simply as its victims is to see them as powerless” (35). However, feminists also realize that their discussions regarding female aggression and violence need to focus not simply on asserting the existence of both, but also on distinguishing the realities of female aggression and violence from the negative stereotypes perpetuated by society. Paula Ruth Gilbert has explored the grave implications that certain cultural stereotypes and prejudices regarding violent women (namely, that violent women are more deviant than violent men) have for women in the criminal justice system.

In the past, Oates has avoided identifying herself as a feminist author, claiming, “I am very sympathetic with most of the aims of feminism, but cannot write feminist literature because it is too narrow, too limited” (qtd. in Sjoberg 107). Nevertheless, Elaine Showalter has found Oates to be an author concerned with feminist themes who has yet to receive the attention from feminists she deserves (“*My Friend*” 44). In “*Lover*,” “*Gun Love*,” and “*Secret, Silent*,” Oates addresses feminist concerns regarding female aggression and violence. In these works she affirms the existence of female violence

while revealing the violence to be, in most part, a reaction to sexual oppression and restrictive gender norms. She examines ways in which women have taken their aggression underground at the risk of their own well being. Furthermore, she mimics past and present narratives that eroticize female violence and aggression in order to satirize and expose these narratives as male-oriented fantasies. Most importantly, perhaps, Oates focuses a critical eye on the ethos of violence that has been ingrained in American culture since the country's inception. In the three stories discussed in this chapter, as in much of Oates's fiction, the author unravels the message enforced by the popular media that violence is glamorous, exciting, natural, and an appropriate means of approaching conflict. This ethos is reinforced as Hollywood and the popular media fetishize violence by mass-producing images of heroic, sexually attractive, violent women; as video games continue to offer audiences the opportunity to role play as voluptuous, violent women (and watch as these same female representations fall victim to violent assaults in games); and as more actual women transgress gender boundaries only to mimic the negative, destructively aggressive behavior modeled by these and other cultural representations that celebrate violence.

### III. Conclusion

In “The Vampire,” “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent,” Oates directs her level gaze at female aggression and violence. She approaches the topic determined to reinforce the realities of female violence and aggression, rather than the androcentric stereotypes and clichés surrounding these phenomena. In “The Vampire,” Oates undermines traditional conceptions of female aggression and violence, revealing the primary ideology behind the creation of popular Lethal Woman images: that aggression and violence, when displayed by women, threaten the gendered system upon which western society is founded, a system which designates strength, control, and socioeconomic power as the birth rites of men.

In “Lover,” “Gun Love,” and “Secret, Silent,” Oates depicts female violence and aggression more realistically. The women in these stories are not evil, like Janessa, nor are they crazy, hysterical, or determined to be men, all of which are popular cultural perceptions of violent women. Furthermore, Oates’s violent females in these texts are straight, white, middle- and upper-class women, which counters the elitist, sexist, and racist cultural assumptions that violent and criminal women tend to be poor, and/or lesbians, and/or black or Hispanic.

Oates’s authorial gaze is an unyielding beam, female in origin, but which nonetheless refuses to discriminate between its objects based on their caste or sex. In *Faithless*, Oates’s focus on violence in America is objective; although she suggests that society’s outright disavowal of female aggression can transform healthy female aggression into violence, she ultimately does not excuse female violence any more than she has excused male violence in her past works, and her stories do not celebrate any

symbolic “liberation” behind women’s acts of violence towards men. “The Vampire,” “*Lover*,” “*Gun Love*,” and “*Secret, Silent*” are not intended as political feminist texts, but they do offer possibilities for feminist action. In order to achieve true equality, women must acknowledge all similarities shared between themselves and men, not just the positive similarities. Women cannot claim to possess the same tendencies towards positive aggression as men, without admitting they possess some negative aggressive tendencies as well. Finally, as taught by Medusa, gazing at something directly is one means of asserting control—in order to control and prevent violence, including female violence, women must, like Oates, acknowledge its presence.

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