Trauma and Alienation: Intergenerational Dialogue in Oates' Early Novels

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Abstract

Joyce Carroll Oates’ early masterpiece is the tetralogy of Wonderland. The quartet takes the family as the core and runs through the growth and memories of characters in different eras. There are contradictions in the intergenerational dialogue under different social and cultural backgrounds. The contradiction between the parents of the two sexes affects the child's growth process. This article compares the dialogue relationship between "parent-son" and "parent-daughter" and examines the growth themes of the same generation. It is precisely because of the trauma that the family brings to the children that they promote the alienation of the children. All this is due to Oates's unique preference for the culture background of the sixties.

Keywords

Trauma; Alienation; Oates, Intergenerational dialogue; Culture.

1. Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates is an important contemporary American writer. She is known as the "Black Lady of American Literature"(McMichael George, 1998), "the writer among writers", "maybe the best male and female novelist since Faulkner"(Wang xiaoying, Yang Jing, 2004), "Fawkner in a skirt" (Huang Tiechi, 2000)and so on. In 1987, at a private banquet held by former Soviet leader Gorbachev during his visit to the United States, Oates was one of the guests invited to attend. She is also a humanities artist who personally awarded the "National Medal and National Humanities and Arts Medal" by President Obama. American writer John Updike praised her: "If the word 'woman' exists, then she (Oates) deserves to be given this crown." Her early art of novels is based on tetralogy Wonderland which is represented. In the tetralogy of Wonderland, "house and window" is the main place to connect the family and marriage life of both sexes. The house of geographical space is internalized as a symbol of psychological space. Characters either start a relationship between the sexes through yearning for it and change the existing life or identity; or suffer from loneliness and claustrophobia, and hopelessly resist and sink in the relationship between the sexes. Oates went beyond simply examining the fate of women in marriage and family, however, and expressed deep sympathy for both sexes in her works. The contradiction between the sexes becomes a traumatic memory in the growth process of children, which leads to the contradiction and alienation of intergenerational dialogue.


In the novel A Garden of Early Delights, based on the dialogue between mother and son, Clara refused Laurie to be Swan’s father, because she thought that she could not give her son a "real name". Laurie, who returned again, experienced war and became impoverished, unable to satisfy Clara’s material world needs. Clara chose a "father" for Swan. Although Swan didn’t like Revere, he knew that Revere is not his real father. Clara made her son the sole heir as she wished,
but Swan often thought of Robert he accidentally killed. Wandering on the verge of collapse of consciousness several times, he even thought how to punish Clara. "Yet at the same time he knew she must be punished, and he alone was the instrument of punishment." (Oates, 2003) He returned to the farm when he collapsed and aimed his gun at Revere. Clara shouted out the secret he had kept for many years: "You're weak, you're nothing like your father, or your grandfather, that's my secret knowledge of you—'Steven Revere.'" (Oates, 2003) With a shot, Clara's "control" of Swan finally failed.

As far as the dialogue between father and son is concerned, there is only one direct dialogue between Swan and his biological father Laurie. Stepfather Revere is the "father" imposed on him by his mother, and there is not much emotional exchange between them. Although Swan tried to imitate his stepfather's son Clark, there was a barren spiritual connection between him and his stepfather.

Swan tried to admit Revere as his father, his father, and though the idea of Clara being his mother should have been harder for him to accept, he still could not quite understand what it meant to have a father. What did it mean, exactly? How was he to behave toward this man? He imitated any models he came across—he had been imitating and improving upon Clark's style for years—but at the very heart of their relationship was a sense of lone and emptiness across which father and son might contemplate each other forever. (Oates, 2003)

Swan was hard to return to the end in the real society and killed his father. In short, for Swan, his mother Clara hopes to achieve the desired life through him, but his biological father Laurie is missing. Swan committed suicide again through "father killing" and punished his mother. Cynthia Charlotte Stevens explained the cause of the destruction of mother and child. Clara and Swan are both "victims" of their parents, but "the cause of the final destruction of the two children is not economic poverty, but the destruction of the close psychological connection between them and their parents. In the end, it is the family—— Composed of controlling adults and helpless children-this determines the 'destiny' of the characters described by Oates." (Stevens Cynthia Charlotte, 1974)

The novel Expensive People is more of a dialogue between mother and son. Mother Nada ran away from home three times, which is equivalent to abandoning Richard. Father Elwood traveled frequently, although he provided material security for the family, he was in a state of lack. He likes to give orders, and sometimes expresses contempt for Nada who frequents the literary salon reception. Richard expected the appearance of another father.

I kept waiting for another man to appear, not bounding into the room with that bulky, boyish, wet grin my father had but walking quite sedately and confidently in, taking over. (Oates, 1968)

After Nada ran away for the third time, his father cried to Richard: Since Nada became pregnant, she has been away from home. She had an abortion twice... the mother left and the father and Richard "gotta stick together". After Nada went home, Richard asked her what "aborted" was. He saw that Nada, who had turned off the subject, did not tell the truth. That night, taking advantage of Nada and Libby, who was visiting unexpectedly, the father who had returned early suggested that he pretends to go out with father and son, and then suddenly returns home to see what Nada is doing. This time the "father-son agreement" indicated that the two were also "abandoned" to form an alliance. Once, he passed the school's sex education class, and the teacher explained the true meaning of "abortion". Richard began to prepare for "Mother Killing." After Nada died, his father brought "Mother" Mavis to reveal his true colors.

"Look, you little brat, you neurotic little nut, I'm through with all this horseshit! Mavis is going to be your new mother, and if you don't like it you can go to hell! I've had enough of this lousy American father bit! I've had enough of smiling and gritting my teeth and taking it in the guts, from you or your mother, both of you, and from now on things are going to be different. It's no
happy, forgiving Elwood Daddy—it's going to be your Father whom you are going to respect, buster, or get the hell out, I don’t care how young you are or how nuts." (Oates,1968)  

Father Elwood was originally missing, but because Nada ran away from home three times, the two formed an alliance with each other. Richard "kills mother" and "new mother" Mavis appears, but "Papa Elwood" disappears and becomes "daddy". This is an alternative irony. In them, from Bullock’s hatred to Jules' "spiritual father killing". "Spiritual father-killing" refers to the consciously "father-killing", but does not reflect the behavior. Bullock's mother died young. With the socio-economic decline, a large number of local layoffs, his father lost his job and drank all day long. Bullock thinks his father is ill and should be taken away and locked up. He was rebellious and hostile towards his father and bored with his family. He joined the society prematurely and fooled around with the troubled teenager, killed Bernie and ran away. 

By the generation of Jules, it evolved into "spiritual killing of fathers." Before Jules was born, Howard, as a police officer, was suspected for fooling around with prostitutes and taking money from them. War and unemployment made him a silent member of the family. Jules thought he was the only real man in the tomb-like house. On the one hand, he preached that he hated his father, on the other hand he repented of his disobedience to his parents. Once, when Maureen and Betty were arguing at the dinner table, he had a father-killing consciousness for the first time, "What's going to happen? Tonight will be Jules's butcher's knife and let him taste it? What? Surgery on his fat belly?"(Oates,1980) He couldn't stand his father's appearance, which was a dialogue of contradictory personality. He went out to do child labor very early and worked with problem teenagers in society. After his father died, Jules understood the essence of his anger-money. He felt a hint of joy for not killing his father. Mother Loretta and Jules can be said to be a dependent relationship. He is a role that a mother always needs in the family. He grew up in the shadow of war, and he had seen crashed airplanes, burning fires, and cruel pictures. With a heroic temperament, he is eager to find a way straight forward through hard work. He yearns for freedom, but unlike Maureen's complete escape, he has a sense of responsibility for the family and is the family's financial pillar. During Maureen's autism, Jules, who was walking around, sent five letters to his mother about the current life. These letters can be seen as Jules's spiritual dependence on Loretta. He yearns for the psychological connection between family warmth and his mother. 

In Wonderland, Jesse's father "kills son" because of business bankruptcy. Peterson becomes Jesse's adoptive father. After Jesse helped Mary escape from the family, he received a letter from Peterson and sentenced him to "death." "You are dead, you no longer exist.... You are dead, you no longer exist."(Oates,1980) It can be said that the adoptive father Peterson was a kind of "spiritual killing" to Jesse. Before every meal, Peterson asked his wife and children, "What did you do today, my dear?" The son composes in his own world all day, and his relationship with his parents is indifferent. Mother Mary finally escaped with the help of her adopted son Jesse instead of resorting to her son. This further shows the indifferent mother-child relationship. 

Looking at the dialogue between the four-part "Parent-and-Son", Swan "kills his father" due to the control of the mother and the absence of the father in A Garden of Earthly Delights. In Expensive People, the father is absent, and the father is converted into an alliance after the mother is abandoned, and then the father is absent again after Richard "Mother Killing". In Them, it evolved into a phenomenon of "spiritual killing of the father", expecting the absence or death of the father. Wonderland rose to a kind of "spiritual killing", and the father was sentenced to death. With the indifference between generations, the psychological connection between parents and children is increasingly destroyed. The background of intergenerational dialogue has gradually shifted from the originally closed family to a broad social level, especially in them and Wonderland. Many issues of social symbiosis are mixed in the background of dialogue, which makes the discussion of intergenerational dialogue go deeper. The contradiction of intergenerational dialogue runs through a clue, that is, "father-killing—-
mother-killing——spiritual father-killing——child-killing/spiritual child-killing”. Regarding the reasons for the plots of father killing and mother killing in the novel, Oates pointed out:These novels are put together in parallel construction. Each deals with a male imagination and consciousness that seeks to liberate itself from certain confinements, and only in the last novel, them, does this consciousness really become liberated in what I see to be an ironic way that an act, a gratuitous act of murder, is committed, and this frees the individual.(Milazzo Lee,1989)


Throughout the dialogue between "parent-daughter" in the tetralogy, we can see that parents become "Medusa" for girls to escape. In A Garden of Earthly Delights Clara wanted to help her mother Pearl take care of her younger brother Sheldon when she was very young. Father beat Clara violently after drinking. First look at the father-daughter dialogue:"Bitch just like your mother!" he said......"They want to get up an leave, they don't stay home, they run off—the bitches—just like their mother," Carleton shouted. "They don't stay home but run off! Bitches don't love nobody—Clara don't give a damn, my Clara—"He began to sob. "They run off an— Dirty filthy bitch like all of them— " (Oates,2003)In such a poor family, the father expects that the role of the daughter and mother in the family is to undertake housework. With her mother missing and her father violent, Clara ran away from home.

Similarly, Maureen in them is also tied up by her mother in the family, and she has to devote herself to heavy housework when she returns home from school. In addition to doing homework, she also irons clothes, makes dinner, cleans the kitchen, washes dishes, waits for her stepfather, and makes coffee in the middle of the night. In Maureen’s eyes, Loretta would never understand herself, taking it for granted that she was numb and without emotion. When she quarreled with her stepfather, her mother deliberately turned a blind eye and remained silent. It was this kind of life that made Maureen want to escape, which caused her to be beaten after betraying her body. Maureen finally started "her own life" with the help of marriage. The spiritual separation between the parents and the girl formed indifferent spiritual violence, which caused Maureen to "run away" in another sense.

The novel Wonderland carries the modern "alienation", which is first reflected in the dialogue between Peterson and his daughter Hilda. The daughter is a "memory genius", but she behaves strangely and has a fat body. Hilda also had a father-killing consciousness. "Does he know that this ego had concealed from him and conspired against him? Once she even broke a glass and wrapped it in a towel, trying to crush the glass put his food in and kill him!" (Oates,2003) But this consciousness eventually became an alienation of itself. Frightened by her father, she participated in a genius memory test competition. The game section is completely alienated by Hilda. She is completely closed in the digital world of the game and loses the ability to communicate with the outside world. Oscar's opponent suffered a nosebleed during the game and fell down. Hilda, who was already in a frenzied state, yelled at his father, "I know, you want to put me in your mouth! I know! ... You want to. I rolled into a ball, threw me into your mouth with a plop, and returned to where I came from! You want to eat all of us!...Dad wants to kill me. Eat me." Spiritually Hilda had no idea what was alienated, and she announced her own death. "Hilda is a very nice, very nice girl, but I am not a girl at all, or even a woman. I don't know what I am. Is there a part of the soul that is neither male nor female? ... Hilda put his head on his father’s shoulder and fell asleep. I didn't sleep. I didn't think about it. I'm dead." (Oates,2003)

Shelly talked about the indifference of love between mother and daughter in her letter to her father Jesse. Because of her mother's absence, she called her home "an authentic grave". Jesse's love for Shelly is out of protection, “He must prevent strangers and strange men from bullying her. People may hurt her through the holes in her body, breaking into her willing, flexible blood
trickle, and She would just smile silently and charmingly like a dumb bar."(Oates, 1980) This kind of ubiquitous and all-time care is a kind of "spiritual violence" for Shelly, who wants freedom. Shelly wanted to get rid of her father and get freedom, and eventually ran away with Noel, living a life of drug, robbery, and social hippies. "She resorted to violence to escape the violence itself, which further proves that such a life is inevitable. But her acceptance of masochism shows that it is only from the role she is forced to play, and only this is separated from her body. Only the role can continue to live." (Muzaffar Hanan, 2005) The conflict between the father's overprotection and the daughter's anti-thirst for freedom is fully reflected on this point. In addition, Shelly said, "You can't catch me. I don’t exist, you can’t catch me". (Muzaffar Hanan, 2005) Bakhtin's understanding of personal and cultural structure is consistent: To exist means to exist for others, and then to exist for oneself through others. Man does not have his own internal sovereign territory, he is always on the boundary; when he looks inside himself, he is looking at the eyes of others, or he is observing with the eyes of others. (Bahkin, 1998) Xie Li’s phrase "I don't exist" actually draws on the American cultural structure with the help of the relationship between father and daughter.

A them of "violence and runaway" throughout the intergenerational dialogue between "parent-daughter" in the tetralogy. Gayle Greene believes that the desire to leave was an important characteristic of the characters in female novels in the early 1960s, both in original and metaphorical terms. "Leaving home is not enough. Change requires more action, determination, or will: it requires a process of reimagining that allows desire and consciousness to evolve and change." We all remember Nada's final departure from Ibsen's The door slammed at the moment when the family ran away, but where will the protagonist go after leaving? This is a question that novelists in the 1960s, including Oates, devoted themselves to exploring.

4. Cultural Exploration of Intergenerational Dialogue: Looking Back at the Sixties

The quartet is like a "cyclorama" (cyclorama), throughout the tetralogy of Wonderland, which not only covers American society from the 1920s to the 1970s, but also vividly depicts different classes, different ages, and different image groups. There is a dialogue between the characters themselves and American history. On the basis of grasping the chaotic characteristics of the times, Oates extended the ideological dialogue between the characters to the social and cultural level. As Bakhtin revealed, "discourse can record the most subtle and short-lived stage of all transitions in social changes." (Bahkin, 1998) Oates created the tetralogy at a time when American society and culture were turbulent. Starting with the "lost generation" that prevailed in the 1920s, to the more radical and rebellious "Beat Generation" in the 1960s, to the hippie counter-mainstream culture in the early 1970s, American society and culture can be described as "a public voice " Noisy".

As far as the family is concerned, the economic recession and unemployment that began in the 1920s and 1930s are reflected in Clara’s father Carlton, Loretta’s father, Jesse’s father and other parents. After two world wars, men were requisitioned to the battlefield and women began to work. From the 1950s, there was a sexual revolution in society, and it blossomed in the 1960s. In the traditional family structure, the father and the raising mother who required to earn a living began to experience the disintegration of reality, and the traditional family morality gradually declined. With the economic changes, Oates put these conflicts in the struggle between the beasts of personal consciousness, and the conflicts between the genders and intergenerational dialogues in the family, and they still frequently demonstrated domestic violence and social violence.

However, family-level problems are only the companions of social-level problems. The black people's strong demand for social equality and the "slowly rising" compensation mechanism of
government agencies intensified the black civil rights movement, and racial conflicts were in the ascendant in the social turmoil of the 1960s. The younger generation began a "counterculture", rather than a "crusader" of "fake culture". (Daniel Bell, 1989) Racial riots and "countercultural" movements, intermingled with student democratic movements and anti-war and peace movements, have merged into an irresistible great current of the times, and they have become increasingly radical. Through Jules in them, we can see that his growth environment is the birthplace of the car king Ford-Detroit. The self-made American dream and the great enthusiasm to explore the west have become part of Jules's character. Branch undercurrent.

The Westward Movement and the frontier pioneering spirit abandoned the measurement standards of blood relationship, family background or social status, and re-established a new standard-self-reliance. "In a sense, the concepts of individualism and egalitarianism in the United States were formed in the process of westward advancement to a certain extent." (He shu, Li Peifeng, 2011) The individual's desire for freedom became the last of that era. Kennedy's sentence: "My fellow Americans, don't ask what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country." I don't know how many young people's minds have been cleansed up. They are passionate about change. In the last chapter "Come back, my long-awaited soul...", campus students' "college students' anti-Vietnam War" organization, anti-poverty coalition, and demonstrations, the young generation eager for equality declared that they would break the "dirty world", thus "rebuilding a brand new America." After the economic and cultural development of the United States after World War II, the sense of belonging a generation of people represented by Revere and Carlton relied on the land has undergone a new turn. That is, the focus on the original material poverty shifts to the focus on the comparison of social classes and equality of status. The changes in individual consciousness and the differences between generations under the details of the times come to life in Oates's writings.

Although it now appears that "the cultural impulse of the 1960s is like the parallel political activism, most of it has been exhausted now. Counterculture has also proved to be a silver gun." (Daniel Bell, 1989) However, after entering the 1970s, hippies emerged in the counterculture. They proved the existence of "self" by drug anesthesia and social debauchery. They are incompatible with the mainstream of society, so as to escape the oppression of modern society and seek the true form of "free". They go beyond the family to pursue the freedom of sex and appear in the mode of communal communities, reaching the pinnacle of the disintegration of traditional family moral concepts. The novel Wonderland runs through the depression after World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and the turbulent sixties (probably from 1963 to 1973, from the assassination of President Kennedy to the end of the Vietnam War). The last chapter "Chaos America" focuses on the hippie rebellious culture represented by Shelly, mixed with the historical events of President Kennedy's assassination on the generation of people represented by Jesse's "feeling of loss", and the ever-changing social level is prominently expressed in the characters In the inner world of emotional changes. The strong impact of the two world wars on human psychology and the depression of the spirit were also included in the pen. For example, Laurie, who loves freedom by nature, turned to thirsty for marriage and family; Howard became a silent member of the family under the impact of unemployment and war after the war. Jesse married Helen, the daughter of Nobel Prize winner Cardi. Jesse initially awed Helen and completely alienated her after acquiring her accidentally. The two sides reached a balance of social inverted U-shaped structure in indifference and loss. In addition, reflecting the spiritual world of intellectuals, Tricker, a cannibalistic lunatic hiding in the laboratory, later took drugs and wrote poetry. His loose soul "like a deflated balloon." "...In the 1960s, violence was affirmed not only as a method of treatment, but also as a necessary concomitant of social change."

Oates did not shy away from the mood of these times, living alone."I believe that we yearn to transcend the merely finite and ephemeral; to participate in something mysterious and
communal called "culture"—and that this yearning is as strong in our species as the yearning to reproduce the species." She started writing and spared no effort to show the cultural sentiments of a generation. As the "Newsweek" review said, Like the most important modern writers—Joyce, Proust, Mann—Oates has an absolute identification with her material: the spirit of a society at a crucial point in its history. (Oates, 2003)

5. Conclusion

Oates used the contradictions between some repeated character dialogues to lay out chapters, forming an intertextual relationship between the four texts. "There is a dialogue relationship between all the elements of the novel structure, which means that they are opposed to each other like counterpoint melody." (Bahkin, 1998) The dialogue between characters is vividly expressed through the counterpoint of the multi-voice structure. The inside and outside of the novel are like a musical work composed of multiple voices, forming a symphony of dialogue between characters in different periods. "Actually, the maze is obsessed by Oates. This began in her early novels, such as "Luxury Man," "Wonderland," and "At Your Fudge." Oates borrowed from Borges's "The Labyrinth" The inscription. Parallel to Borges' three novels about the labyrinth, "Wonderland" has developed its symbolic plot, characters and themes." (Carrington, 1985)

The original text is as follows: In fact, the labyrinth is an Oatesian obsession that began in her early novels, Expensive People, Wonderland and Do With Me What You Will. Introduced by an epigraph from Borges' Labyrinths, Wonderland developed its symbolic plot, characters and themes through close parallels to three Borges stories about labyrinths.] Comparing the dialogues inside and outside the text of the tetralogy, we can see that Oates' creation is becoming more and more mature, revealing the changes in the dialogue between the characters in the novel and the changes in the dialogue between the characters, and thus rise to cultural thinking.

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References


