

BLACK WATER AND MUDWOMAN BY JOYCE CAROL OATES: TWO DROWNINGS IN COMPARISON

BLACK WATER E MUDWOMAN DE JOYCE CAROL OATES: DOIS
AFOGAMENTOS EM COMPARAÇÃO

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ABSTRACT: The two novels by Joyce Carol Oates analyzed in this paper, *Black Water* (1993) and *Mudwoman* (2012), were written in two different moments of the author's career. The first one is based on the infamous Chappaquiddick Incident (1969), where a woman drowned in a car driven by Senator Edward Kennedy; the second is the story of Meredith Neukirchen, a Professor and president of an Ivy League College, who was thrown in a river by her mother as a child. These novels share a relationship of intertextuality deriving from several elements such as the common setting (the water where the protagonist lose/risk losing their lives), the idea of storytelling and the attempt to silence this ability and an ideal dialogue between the two texts on the idea of death and responsibility. The paper analyzes these common features and the reasons that brought Oates to writing, twenty years after the first, what can be defined as the novel of survival: the one where the protagonist lives to tell her story.

KEYWORDS: Chappaquiddick Incident; storytelling; fact and fiction; power relations; American history.

RESUMO: Os dois romances de Joyce Carol Oates analisados neste artigo, *Black Water* (1993) e *Mudwoman* (2012), foram escritos em dois momentos diferentes da carreira da autora. O primeiro é baseado no infame Incidente de Chappaquiddick (1969), onde uma mulher se afogou em um carro dirigido pelo senador Edward Kennedy; A segunda é a história de Meredith Neukirchen, professora e presidente de uma Ivy League College, que foi jogada em um rio por sua mãe quando criança. Estes romances compartilham uma relação de intertextualidade derivada de diversos elementos, como o cenário comum (a água onde o protagonista perde/corre o risco de perder suas vidas), a ideia de contar histórias e a tentativa de silenciar essa habilidade, e um diálogo ideal entre os dois textos sobre a ideia de morte e responsabilidade. O artigo analisa essas características comuns e as razões que levaram Oates à escrita, vinte anos após a primeira, do que pode ser definido como um romance de sobrevivência: aquele em que a protagonista vive para contar sua história.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Incidente de Chappaquiddick; contar histórias; fato e ficção; relações de poder; História americana.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the beginning was the image of the drowning girl. The girl was Mary Jo Kopechne, twenty-nine years old, former assistant of Robert Kennedy during his presidential campaign. She met Senator Edward Kennedy at a party following a regatta on July 18th, 1969, on the Chappaquiddick Island (Massachusetts) and they decided to go back to their hotels together on the Senator's Toyota (KENNEDY, 2009, p. 290). When they arrived at the Dike Bridge, a small bridge that crosses the Poucha Pond, the car fell in the canal, sinking almost immediately. Kennedy managed to flee from the window, while the woman, trapped in the car, drowned a few hours later (SHERRILL, 1976, pp. 96-97). The Senator always maintained that he had tried several times to save the woman, but eventually he had given up. Anyway, he reported the accident only ten hours later. In the inquiry opened by the district attorney's office of Edgartown he only pled guilty of leaving the scene of the accident (DAMORE, 1988, p. 191). He was sentenced with two months of detention in the House of Correction of Barnstable, but the injunction was never applied (DAMORE, 1988, p. 193).

Kopechne was born in Wilkes-Barre (Pennsylvania) in 1940 and she graduated in *Business Administration* at the Coldwell College for Women (New Jersey). She worked for a year at the Mission of St. Jude (Alabama) and later she entered the staff of the Senator of Florida George Smothers. In 1964, she worked for Robert Kennedy in the "Boiler Room" during his campaign. Mary Jo lived in Georgetown with three girls and she was single (DAMORE 18,33,59).

Oates had been fascinated with the image "of the drowning girl/trapped girl in the car, so many hours" for over twenty years (COLOGNE-BROOKES, 2009, p. 178) so, in 1993, she published the novel *Black Water*, based on the Chappaquiddick Incident. However, she chose not to tell the incident exactly as

it occurred, in its actual setting, but to place it in the Nineties and in a fictional location in Maine: Grayling Island. The party where the protagonist, Kelly Kelleher, meets the Senator (whose name is never revealed) does not follow a regatta, but it is a typical 4th of July celebration.

After twenty more years, the author retrieved the image of a drowning girl in the 2012 novel *Mudwoman*, a story that bears some resemblance with the previous one. Its main character is Meredith Ruth Neukirchen, a middle-aged woman who is a Professor of Philosophy and the President of an Ivy League College in the State of New York. Meredith, or M.R., had been born as Jedina Kraek, and as a girl she had been thrown into a river, the Black Snake River, along with her sister Jewell, by their psychopath mother Marit. Jewell drowned, while Jedina/Meredith, who had been put into a fridge and then thrown in the water, was saved. She took on the identity of her sister, whose body would be found only many years later, and later she was adopted by Agatha and Konrad Neukirchen. The novel, set between 2002 and 2003, is the account of her childhood and her teenage years -seen from the point of view of the adult woman- and the rediscovery of the years before the adoption.

The aim of this paper is to show how the two novels share, even if not made explicit by the author, a relation of intertextuality. Several passages will be compared to highlight the similarities between the texts to demonstrate that *Mudwoman* is the “ideal” sequel of *Black Water*: a novel where the protagonist gets rescued and is able to tell her story. The water, which in *Black Water* is a carrier of death, in *Mudwoman* cannot annihilate the life of Jedina/Meredith. The place where the girl was supposed to die, will persist in her memories forever, “[f]or we most cherish those places to which we have been brought to die but have not died” (OATES, 2012, p. 4).

The setting where the two protagonists drown shows many similarities both in the atmosphere and the lexicon Oates uses to describe them. The Black Snake River and the pond where Kelly drowns share many adjectives or synonyms that characterize them as two very similar places:

On all sides a powerful brackish marshland odor, the odor of damp, and decay, and black earth, black water. (OATES, 1993, p. 8).

In sleep smelling the sharp brackish odor of still water and of rich dark earth and broken and rotted things in the earth. (OATES, 2012, p. 1).

Both waters are brackish, hence with a marine element. The land all around is dark and the smell is that of decay (*Black Water*) and rottenness (*Mudwoman*). The first quoted piece introduces these perceptions one by one, using commas that allow the author to list them. The second piece lacks the punctuation, so the perceptions are all on the same level, reproducing the dizziness of the girl that was brought half-asleep to the Black Snake River by her mother.

The fauna is what differentiates the two places: Kelly perceives the presence of mosquitoes and nocturnal insects (OATES, 1993, p. 48), while the apocalyptic scene where Meredith is brought to die is dominated by black birds and their “raucous and accusing cries” (OATES, 2012, p. 8). Nonetheless, both Kelly and Meredith focus their attention on the vegetation around:

[...] so many of the trees in the marsh seemed to be dead...were they dead?...isolated tree trunks in the twilight gloom denuded of leaves, limbs, bark gray and shiny-smooth as old as scar tissue. (OATES, 1993, p. 59)

They [the birds] settled in the skeletal trees fierce and clattering. (OATES, 2012, p. 8)

In both cases, the trees are stark, and they give a spectral look to the places, also obtained using adjectives such as “dead” and “skeletal”. Even more evident is the humanization of the trees. In the paragraph from *Black Water*, Oates uses terms usually related to humans to define them: “denuded” inevitably reminds of a human stripping, and the grey bark of the trunks is compared to scar tissue, as if they were covered in skin. In *Mudwoman*, the trees are “skeletal”: an adjective that is linked to the human skeleton. Such humanization characterizes the trees as ideal witnesses to the protagonists’ tragedy.

Oates also shapes the two places as “magic”, since, as Mario Domenichelli writes, “lakes and ponds are magic places, of the kind of magic touched by melancholy” (DOMENICHELLI, 1998, p. 137).

The dark atmosphere of the two waters is further exalted when Oates describes their consistency:

[...] the car plunged into what appeared to be a pit, a pool, stagnant water in the marshland [...] an evil muck-water, thick, viscous, tasting of sewage, gasoline, oil. (OATES, 1993, pp. 63, 97)

No smells more pungent than the sharp muck-smell of the mudflats where the brackish river water seeps and is trapped and stagnant with algae the bright vivid green of Crayola. (OATES, 2012, p. 8)

The adjective “stagnant” is present in both descriptions, and it is accompanied by “muck”, always in compound words (“muck-water” and “muck-smell”) which give also an olfactive connotation to the water.

The chosen setting, as shown above, is in both cases an element that lends the event an aura of darkness and anguish. Yet, natural elements are also ideal and silent witnesses of what happens to Meredith and Kelly: the suppression of their lives, but most of all that of their speech, and the possibility to relate about their stories.

3 THE LOSS OF SPEECH

As it was seen in the piece from *Black Water*, natural elements are often humanized. Such humanization also involves the water, there defined as “evil”. The water has a taste too, because Kelly starts swallowing it “in quick small mouthfuls” (OATES, 1993, p. 151). The same thing happens to Meredith, since Oates highlights in both novels how water penetrates the bodies of the two main characters. A recurrent formula in *Black Water* is “[a]s the black water filled her lungs, and she died”, which also closes the novel. In *Mudwoman* as well, Oates uses the verb “to fill” when she recounts the moment of Meredith’s drowning: “[...] a mud that filled the child’s mouth, and a mud that filled the child’s eyes, and a mud that filled the child’s ears [...]” (OATES, 2012, P. 10). The muddy water fills all the parts of the girl’s body that are connected to her senses (mouth, eyes, ears) as if to eliminate her perceptions, so to stop her interaction with the world around her. When Meredith recalls that moment as an adult, the author repeats: “Mud in eyes, nose. Mud in mouth so all speech is lost” (OATES, 2012, p. 201). The relation between the muddy water and the inability to talk is evident but not explicit in *Black Water*: Kelly cannot tell her story because the water, filling her lungs, killed her. Yet, even if Meredith survived, being alive did not guarantee that she was able to relate of her own experience. The mud, which had filled the mouth of the girl, returns ideally to block her speech even as an adult. Indeed, the woman is described as a person who is never able to interrupt other people’s speeches, even when she is working: “As, teaching, when she’d approach a seminar room hearing the voices and laughter of the students inside, she’d hesitate to intrude—to evoke an abrupt and too-respectful silence” (OATES, 2012, p. 13).

Kelly, before she dies, possesses the same fear of speaking, especially in the presence of the Senator. When she interacts with him, her tone is

submissive. In the third chapter, for instance, her friend Buffy asks her why she must leave the party so soon. The protagonist is unable to answer with the real reason: “Because he wants me to: he insists. [...] Because if I don’t do as he asks there won’t be any *later*” (OATES, 1993, p. 7). The consequences of this demeanor are strictly verbal, because when Kelly and the Senator get in the car, and she realizes that they are wandering through unknown streets, she would like to tell him that they have probably got lost, “but hesitated to utter the word [lost] for fear of annoying The Senator” (OATES, 1993, p. 60). This is a feature that Ann Rosalind Jones defines as “verbal hesitancy induced in women by a society in which men have had the first and the last word” (JONES, 1981, p. 379). Moreover, verbal hesitancy is a consequence of stereotypes related to gender roles, “that the silent women accept and reflect the powerlessness they have experienced” since “men are active and get things done, while women are passive and incompetent” (FIELD BELENKY et al., 1997, p. 29).

Meredith’s fear of speaking her mind does not depend on the presence of men but a direct consequence of her mother’s attempt to kill her: “And Mudgirl’s mother, who had filled her mouth with mud to silence all speech in her, forever” (OATES, 2012, p. 191).

The idea of telling one’s own story is the core of the two novels, especially where storytelling is denied, as in *Black Water*. Memory and imagining how someone will tell his/her story, the illusion to have a chance to do it, are themes that Oates scatters throughout the narration to highlight the impossibility for Mary Jo/Kelly to be the one recounting the accident from her point of view. In the first chapters, while Kelly travels in the Senator’s Toyota, her intention is of “memorizing the adventure” (OATES, 1993, p. 16) and “rehearsing the future” (OATES, 1993, p. 90), “shaping the precise words that would encapsulate, in her memory, in her recounting of memory to friends” (OATES, 1993, p. 83). Her confidence that she will have the possibility to tell her story concludes chapter 20, with a reflection:

How crucial for us to rehearse the future, in words. Never to doubt that you will live to utter them.

Never to doubt that you will tell your story.

And the accident too, one day she would transform the accident, the nightmare of being trapped in a submerged car, the near-drowning, the rescue. *It was horrible-hideous. I was trapped and the water was seeping in and he'd gone for help and fortunately there was air in the car, we'd had the windows shut tight, the air conditioner on, yes I know it's a miracle if you believe in miracles.* (OATES, 1993, p. 83).

The continuous and eternal “re-thinking and re-evaluating” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 31), a characteristic feature of the novel, leads, in this case, to a bitter conclusion that seems more a comment on the Chappaquiddick Incident than a reflection on its fictional counterpart: “[...] and what the future may have brought (in contrast to what the events of that night did in fact bring) will forever remain unknowable” (OATES, 1993, p. 37).

The impossibility to know the real unravelling of that night's events is an apparent obstacle to the story but, according to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, even if extreme experiences have always an untransmissible part, “to say untransmissible is not to say inexpressible” (RICOEUR, 2004, p. 452). On this basis, Oates takes on the role of the storyteller, of the keeper of an artificial and non-existent memory.

In his essay “The Storyteller”, Walter Benjamin outlined the essential features of the storyteller, whose major task is to take everything he recounts from a real experience, his or told by others, to make it a shared one (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 87). The reason to do it with certain stories is intrinsic in the nature of every real story: “It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. [...] the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers” (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 86). The storyteller, in Benjamin's view, tells stories that go beyond the mere information, because “information does not survive the moment in which it was

new” (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 90) while a story “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 90). That is certainly the case with what happened on the Chappaquiddick Island on July 18th, 1969. Death makes possible for Oates to tell this story and exalts what Benjamin defines as the exemplary element of an individual’s life (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 93). Death is the core of this story, and it is also what allows the author to celebrate the life of the protagonist, because, as writes Benjamin, “[d]eath is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (BENJAMIN, 1969, p. 94).

4 MALE SAVIORS (OR NOT)

The two protagonists, Kelly and Meredith, may be considered two damsels in distress: a condition that requires, narratively speaking, a “prince” to save them. Men are usually supposed to be the ones who protect women, or at least that is what an outdated conception of gender roles requires. Helen B. Andelin, author of a manual on womanhood from the 1960s, claimed that “[w]hen we compare man’s body build and superior muscular strength with the fragile structure of woman, we cannot deny that man was also created to be her protector” (ANDELIN, 1965, p. 89). In Oates’s vision, male strength is not something that protects women, rather it invades and strangles them, confirming a supremacy that is expressed through apparently innocuous gestures. Such as, for instance, “gripping her hand and squeezing it just perceptibly too hard unconsciously as men sometimes do, as some men sometimes do, needing to *see* to *feel* that pinprick of startled pain in your eyes, the contraction of the pupil” (OATES, 1993, p. 45), or “[p]enetrated her dry alarmed mouth with his enormous tongue?- He had” (OATES, 1993, p. 77). These small gestures reach their peak in the final part of *Black Water*, when the Senator uses Kelly’s body as a lever to get out of the car:

[...] he'd been desperate to get free using her very body to lever himself out of the door overhead where no door should be, forcing the door open against the weight of whatever it was that pressed it down and squeezing his big boned body through that space that seemed scarcely large enough for Kelly Kelleher herself to squeeze through but he was strong he was frantic kicking and scrambling like a great upright maddened fish knowing to save itself by instinct, [...]. (OATES, 1993, p. 76).

The contrast between the robust physical structure of the man (“big boned”) and his demeanor, compared to that of a “maddened fish”, shows how the men to whom women subjugate themselves, as Kelly does with the Senator, “while being very loud, are remarkably inarticulate” (FIELD BELENKY, 1997, p. 30). In this way, the author subverts the trope of the damsel in distress saved by a prince, even if the text is replete with formulas that show how Kelly takes for granted that the Senator is her “protector”. The same scene is seen through her point of view:

She was fighting to escape the water, she was clutching at a man's muscular forearm even as he shoved her away, she was clutching at his trousered leg, his foot, his foot in its crepe-soled canvas shoe heavy and crushing upon her striking the side of her head, her left temple so now she did cry out in pain and hurt grabbing at his leg frantically, her finger nails tearing, then at his ankle, his foot, his shoe, the crepe-soled canvas shoe that came off in her hand so she was left behind crying, begging, “Don't leave me!- help me! Wait!” (OATES, 1993, pp. 64-65).

Oates concludes a few pages later, in the opening of chapter 16, that “HE WAS GONE BUT WOULD COME BACK TO SAVE HER” (OATES, 1993, p. 69). It is a hope that stems from the conviction that women are always someone's property, in need of a male figure by their side. This concept is expressed in a sentence uttered by an unidentified voice while Kelly and the Senator are

traveling in his car: “You know you’re someone’s little girl, oh yes!” (OATES, 1993, p. 58).

Meredith, whose name is often changed into “Mudgirl” or “Mudwoman”, gets rescued. The person who saves her is a man, but he is not the prince charming that Kelly was waiting for while trapped in The Senator’s Toyota. Meredith’s rescuer is a retarded boy, Suttis Coldham, who is sure that a mysterious entity he calls the “King of the Crows” sent him there:

[...] for in his heart it will seem a certainty that the King of the Crows had chosen Suttis Coldham to rescue the mud-child not because Suttis Coldham happened to be close by but because of all men, Suttis Coldham was singled out for the task. *He was the chosen one. Suttis Coldham, that nobody gave a God damn for, before. Without him, the child would not be rescued*” (OATES, 2012, p. 66).

The first part of the passage, with the formula “of all men, Suttis Coldham was singled out for the task”, has an epic tone that contrasts with the character. The choice of a retarded boy, indeed, is due to the purity of the character: the only male who could accomplish such a delicate task. The second sentence, written in italics, quenches the epic tone of the first through the expression “[for whom] nobody gave a God damn for”. Such a contrast shows that heroism can be found in the most unexpected beings, while in *Black Water*, a character who was “one of the powerful adults of the world, manly man, U.S. senator, a famous face and a tangled history, empowered to not merely endure history but to guide it, control it, manipulate it to his own ends” (OATES, 1993, p. 61) was completely shorn of it. The choice of such a character is a variation on the fairytale trope, and quite possibly an ideal comment on the twisted fairytale that *Black Water* -with the runaway of the “hero”- presented the readers. Yet, more elements of the two novels mirror each other, as it will be explained hereafter.

5 AN IDEAL DIALOGUE

Black Water and *Mudwoman* display several similarities that have been highlighted in the previous sections. Yet, there are elements in the second novel that appear as full-fledged references to the first, even if -again- the author did not recognize them as such.

Black Water contains several refrained formulas, among which there is “Am I ready?” (OATES, 1993, pp. 55, 59, 60). Kelly’s voice seems to wonder whether she is ready to live an affair with the Senator, or whether she is ready to die. *Mudwoman* ideally responds to the question with its opening line: “You must be readied [...]” (OATES, 2012, p. 1). The sentence is uttered by Meredith’s mother right before she tosses her daughter into the Black Snake River. It is a precept that Meredith keeps in mind also as an adult. The same formula is rephrased in two chapters set in the present:

Readied. She believed yes, she was.

She was not one to be taken by surprise. (OATES, 2012, 11).

Must ready yourself. Hurry! (OATES, 2012, 69).

The repetition of a sentence used by her mother is perhaps the only trace of the woman that is left in the character of Meredith who -towards the end of the novel- chooses to come to terms with her past and meet her.

The most evident link between the two novels, excluding the black water, is a piece from *Mudwoman* where Meredith goes back to the Black Snake River driving a Toyota (the same brand driven by The Senator in *Black Water*) and she is forced to stop because part of the road had collapsed into the river:

She was thinking how swiftly it must have happened: the road caving in beneath a moving vehicle, a car, a truck- a school bus?- plunging

into the river, trapped and terrified and no one to witness the horror. Not likely that the road had simply collapsed beneath its own weight. Death by (sheer) accident. Surely this was the most merciful of deaths!

Death by the hands of another: the cruelest. (OATES, 2012, 44),

Meredith's thoughts are the ideal comment to the events of *Black Water*. The woman imagines the moment when the road had collapsed, and she rules out the idea that it might have happened when there were no cars circulating on it. She thinks that it must have happened swiftly, as Kelly's accident. The sentence "[a car] plunging into the river, trapped and terrified, and no one to witness the horror" reminds inevitably of the woman trapped in the car, alone and terrified, in *Black Water*. The following thoughts on death can be applied to the events of this novel. Maintaining that death by accident is the most merciful, Oates inserts the adjective "sheer", a definition that does not fit with the Chappaquiddick Incident, since Mary Jo Kopechne could have been saved. She could have survived if Ted Kennedy had reported the accident earlier and had called for help. The failure to rescue her makes it the cruelest death, because it is a death "by the hand of another".

The concept of responsibility is the core of *Black Water*, since Oates claimed she did not want to highlight the "Kennedy-connection" writing it (COLOGNE-BROOKES, 2005, 178). What she really wanted to convey through *Black Water* were ideas, "the issues- guilt/responsibility, denial/confession" (COLOGNE-BROOKES, 2005, 178). This concept is widely analyzed by Ricoeur in his essay *The Just*, where he claims that it is "defined by the obligation to make up or to compensate for the tort one has caused through one's own fault", and "[it] extends as far as does our capacity to do harm" (RICOEUR, 2000, 12, 28). The Senator did not compensate for the damage he had caused, even though somebody compared his action to a murder. Oates commented on this definition saying that "[i]t's just an extreme thing to say. I would never, never say anything

like this...We know what murder is. Murder is premeditated and deliberate. At the very, very most this would be involuntary manslaughter, if you had a prosecutor who would prosecute” (STREITFIELD, 1992).

In the absence of a recognition of responsibility, the only way to compensate for the harm done to the victim is through memory, since “the duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories to an other than self” (RICOEUR, 2004, 89). The duty of memory, which has been fulfilled only partially by anyone who has written about the Chappaquiddick Incident, and not by the person who caused Kopechne’s death, implies that the debt with the victim must be still paid, since, “among those others to whom we are indebted, the moral priority belongs to the victims” (RICOEUR, 2004, 89). Memory involves not only recognizing that these people are gone, but most of all being aware that once they existed, paying the debt with them and “inventorying” their heritage (RICOEUR, 2004, 89). The debt, in this case, is paid by Oates through the reconstruction of the life of a forcedly forgotten figure. Kopechne’s heritage is the warning for all the women to avoid submitting themselves to power relationships with men. The dedication, “For the Kellys”, is for those who are “strong women, but each to different degrees, is victimized” (DALY, 1996, 225). An unsettling anticipation of the Clinton-Lewinsky case, which happened only a few years after the publication of this book.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Mudwoman is, ideally, the novel of survival, not only of the person who does not die, but also of memory which, as it has already been said, is a moral duty that belongs to the victims. Meredith Neukirchen, differently from Kelly

Kelleher, lives to remember and tell her story. She lives to become a Professor and the president of an Ivy League University, erasing that part of her story made of abuse and silencing. A survival, then, but also a rebirth. It is not accidental that Oates chooses the water, even if muddy and impure, as a place to be born again and to remember forever. Because, as writes Domenichelli, “the waterlands [...] are the lands of the dead, the lands of oblivion and therefore the lands of memory. [...] They bear witness to the life that once was there” (DOMENICHELLI, 1998, p. 140).

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