

The Process of Fictionalization in Joyce Carol Oates's *them*

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Two letters written by Maureen Wendall, one of the novel's main characters, to Joyce Carol Oates, the novel's author and Maureen's former teacher, are essential to an understanding of *them*. The letters are passionate, angry, accusatory, and confessional. Maureen challenges Oates with questions, taking her to task for statements she made to her literature class: "You said, 'Literature gives form to life,' I remember you saying that very clearly. What is form? Why is it better than the way life happens, by itself?"¹ The notion that something can provide shape and meaning to our experiences both fascinates and infuriates Maureen, who, like all of Oates's characters, moves in a world in which "Nothing follows" and "anything" can and frequently does happen. A desperate desire for "something to come to us and give a shape to so much pain," pitted against an equally desperate sense that there can be no deliverance from a world so out of control that it "can't be lived" constitutes the conflict which determines so many of the lives in *them*. The tension this conflict produces forces the characters, after attempts to provide order to their lives have failed, to deny the substantiality of their shattering experiences and perceive their lives as fiction.

Oates herself addresses the issue, which Maureen raises, of the dichotomy between literary form and "the way life happens" at the very beginning of *them* in her "Author's Note." Here she announces that she intends the novel to be "a work of history in fictional form." About the life of Maureen Wendall, the subject and source of this personal history, Oates intimates, "My initial feeling about her life was 'This must be fiction, this can't all be real!' My more permanent feeling was, 'This is the only kind of fiction that is real!'" Oates, of course, is aware that by the very act of writing about Maureen and her family she is taking their experiences out of the world of events and transforming them into literature. However, she stringently resists literary explanations and interpretations for the events in her novel, striving instead to have her readers experience the unfolding action as immediately as her characters themselves do, without the mitigation an overt, overriding aesthetic vision would supply. Unlike most social and psychological novels, *them* is relatively little concerned with questions of cause and motive. "Things" happen, and establishing cause and effect relationships becomes less important, and, in certain ways, less possible than getting on with the day-to-day business of living. In her conception and execution of *them* Oates exploits the tension between the order of fiction and the chaos of reality, the very forces which fragment the lives of the novel's three central characters.

In Oates's world, maturity consists of realizing and accepting that there is no design or permanence in one's surroundings and that contentment and hope are taunting invitations to disaster. The future, so much "dangerous time," brings change, and change of any kind is terrible and threatening. Optimism is

¹Joyce Carol Oates, *them* (1969; rpt. Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1969), p. 318. All subsequent page references to *them* will appear in the text.

conceivable only by those too young, too ignorant, or too deranged to know better. Early in the novel, Oates gives us a sunny portrait of Loretta, Maureen Wendall's mother. It is 1937, the country is in the midst of the Depression, and her family is having difficulties. Nonetheless, Loretta is young, cheery, and feels herself full of possibility. In an exuberant moment, she tells her older friend Rita, "Sometimes I feel so happy over nothing I must be crazy." Rita's reply is at once reassuring and premonitory, the advice of a survivor: "Oh, you're not crazy . . . you just haven't been through it yet" (p. 10).

Loretta's remark and Rita's response are relatively tame examples of how madness and the violence with which it is associated always lurk as threats in *them*. The disorder and unpredictability of the external world impose monstrous burdens on its inhabitants, and those who do not succumb to madness live in fear of it. A more compelling instance of the fear of imminent insanity occurs when the narrator describes Loretta's thoughts following her brother's murder of her boyfriend: "And what if she went crazy? . . . [She] had seen other crazy people, had seen how fast they changed into being crazy. No one could tell how fast that change might come" (p. 31). Madness and violence do not build up over a period of time, but, like the fires which recur in the novel, appear out of nowhere and immediately rage out of control, reducing all supposed permanence and solidity to cinders. The lines which separate violence and order, madness and sanity, are too thin to be recognizable and one is always in danger of passing unknowingly from one realm into the other. Characters speak frequently of their fear "Of everything, of going over the edge" (p. 367). Jules Wendall, Maureen's brother, warns us and a television audience after the Detroit riots of 1967 near the end of the book that "Violence can't be singled out from an ordinary day" (p. 473).

One result of the chaos and impoverishment of their environment is that economics becomes a crucial concern in the lives of Oates's characters.² They tend, however, to perceive money not in economic or political but in mystical terms. Even in relatively small sums, money enables one to exert some degree of control over one's existence and all control is magical when cause and effect are inoperative. Both Maureen and Jules Wendall view money in this spiritual way. When, at one point in the book, Maureen prostitutes herself, she cultivates a pathological detachment from the sexuality of her acts and thinks only of the money she will receive: "It was supposed to be out of sight and out of her concern for the moment. But she thought keenly about it, its passing from his hands into hers, its becoming her money. . . . Its power would become hers. . . . [It] was magical in her hands and secret from all the world . . ." (p. 191). Maureen saves and hides the money she earns and thinks about it to an extent clearly out of proportion to what it can do for her. The obsessive accumulation of money becomes an end in itself; its mystique as a charm against disaster overpowers its practical significance.

In relation to this, access, or seeming access, to large sums of money accords one virtually godlike status in *them*. A wealthy man can raise you out of the mire of your daily existence and set your life to rights by a mere act of will. When Jules Wendall is befriended by the second-rate gangster Bernard Geffen, who tosses checks and large bills around with a mad self-assurance, he experiences not mere joy at his good fortune, but a sense of revelation about the nature of life itself. Bernard gives Jules several hundred dollars, offers him a chauffeur's job at two hundred dollars per week, and promises to finance his college

²See Mary Allen, *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 133.

education. Jules reflects that never before “had he really been given a *gift*, a surprising gift of the kind that stuns the heart, that lets you know why people keep on living—why else, except in anticipation of such gifts, such undeserved surprises?” (p. 231). Money is a sign of the gods’ favor. It is not architectural similarity alone which reminds Jules of a church when he walks into a bank to cash one of Bernard’s checks.

But, finally, money itself is not lasting protection against the sweeping flood of calamitous events in *them*. Bernard turns out to have no real wealth; his throat is slit in an abandoned tenement by an anonymous killer. Jules’s opportunity, later in the book, to rise to power in a business owned by his millionaire Uncle Samson is never realized either. And money also does not prove to be the solution to Maureen’s problems. Her stepfather discovers her hidden wealth, as well as her means of earning it, and brutally beats her. The promise which money holds out to the poor, who can only obtain it through humiliation or semidivine fiat and do not have the means to hold onto it, is insubstantial and only leaves them feeling greater rage and frustration.

Their inability to shape their lives in any positive way makes the characters in *them* yearn for permanence and stability, a sense of the ordinary. If they cannot be what they want to be, if they cannot live how they want to live, they at least want their circumstances to remain constant. For the most part, they identify permanence with traditional American values: a home, a family, and for the women, the role of housewife. As they emerge and are articulated in characters’ minds, these values seem not so much to be desirable in themselves but empirical proofs that one has “settled down,” has established an entrenched position in the battle of life.

Oates dramatizes this search for permanence early in *them* when Maureen’s parents, Loretta and Howard Wendall, marry. Loretta, while she does not seem to love him, is grateful to Howard for providing her with an escape from her troubled home and neighborhood. She and her new married friends share a sense that “they had all come very close to the edge of something” and had managed to avoid toppling over. Determined not to take risks with their survival, they are pleased to see “how uniform” everything is in their new neighborhood. Indeed, “They were anxious for everything to be uniform” (p. 44). Loretta happily thought that “she had come to the end of her life” and “would probably live here forever.” Having come through disaster, Loretta, exhibiting the resilience characteristic of the poor in Oates’s novels, attempts to reestablish her life in less vulnerable circumstances. The continual disappointment of these efforts is an important motif in *them*.

Maureen Wendall subscribes to the same domestic ideals as her mother, despite Loretta’s life having collapsed around them both innumerable times. Trying to rebuild her life after her spell as a prostitute, a savage beating at the hands of her stepfather, and a lengthy period of near-catatonia, Maureen describes her ideal future situation in one of her letters to Oates:

[I’d be] living in a house out of the city, a ranch house or a colonial house, with a fence around the back, a woman working in the kitchen, wearing slacks maybe, a baby in his crib in the baby’s room, thin white gauzy curtains, a bedroom for my husband and me, a window in the living-room looking out onto the lawn and the street and the house across the street. Every cell in my body aches for this! My eyes ache for it, the balls of my eyes in their sockets, hungry and aching for this, my God how I want that house and that man, whoever he is. (p. 315)

It is evident from the passion and precision of detail in this passage that Maureen has experienced this fantasy at least as intensely as she has the pain and frustration of her own life. Indeed, this fictional, imaginative construct has more reality for her than her own unspeakable past.

The vision of suburban bliss, contrasted to urban chaos and decay, has a profound sense of reality, which his own life lacks, for Maureen's brother Jules as well. At one point in the novel, having run away to the South with a girl he met only two days earlier, Jules wanders about looking for a house from which he can steal some money. He spots a housewife walking barefoot across her lawn to pick up a newspaper: "This sight pleased Jules—it was so ordinary and reasonable. Walking alone here, even in his sweaty clothes, he was close to the secret workings of things, the way people lived when they were not being observed. In himself there were no secret workings: he had no ordinary, reasonable life" (p. 287). Jules's sense of his own unreality is so acute in this passage that he discounts even his own role as an observer. If he is watching, it is as if no one is watching. Jules's desire to experience an orderly existence is so strong that after stealing into one of these suburban houses, "On an impulse he lay down on the bed, his feet side by side. He smiled. So this was what it was like" (pp. 287-88). Real life for Jules, and for so many of Oates's characters, cannot be located in his own experiences but only in the way *they* live. And who "they" are depends upon who you are.

The ideal of the "ordinary, reasonable life" is an aspect of the American Dream which has particular appeal for Oates's characters. The housewives' magazines which package this ideal figure significantly in the process of fictionalization at work in *them*. If the great works of art against which Maureen rails with primitive eloquence in her letters to Oates attempt to give shape to people's suffering, these magazines try to short-circuit human pain and reduce the complexities of life to a series of simpleminded rules. Jim Randolph's wife, whom he is about to abandon along with their three children for Maureen Wendall, reads these magazines regularly and one is described in some detail. A cake adorns the cover of this issue, which includes such articles as "A Doctor Looks at Intimate Problems of Marriage," and "The Five Basic Don'ts": "Don't worry needlessly. Don't expect too much, particularly from your husband. Don't compare yourself to your friends. Don't take anything for granted. Don't daydream." (p. 391).

This magazine and others of its kind perform a double function for their readers. They sugarcoat and simplify life while simultaneously endorsing the same fearful passivity and timidity which was reflected in the lives of Loretta and her friends. The "Five Basic Don'ts" caution ominously against expecting or demanding too much from life. Exerting the merest pressure even on one's spouse will reveal the precariousness and the emptiness of one's existence. In this light, the fact that Maureen is reading one of these magazines in the final scene of the book is unmistakable in its significance. Jules has come to visit Maureen after she has married Jim Randolph and escaped from Detroit to the suburbs. The magazine, the presence of Jules as a symbol of a past she can never completely escape, and the physical instability of her new surroundings ("he reached out to touch the railing of the stairwell—it was plastic—and she saw how wobbly it was, ready to fall off if someone bumped against it") combine to demonstrate how tenuous Maureen's hold on an "ordinary, reasonable life" is (p. 478).

In addition to housewives' magazines, the movies provide another standard by which characters in *them* measure the "reality" of their own lives. Loretta and

Jules, particularly, regard films, however implausibly optimistic they may be, as expressions not of how life should be, but of how life is. They perceive the disparity between the movies they watch and their own experiences not as the result of a cinematic distortion of reality, but as an indication of something unidentifiable but nevertheless very real lacking in their own disaster-ridden lives. As the events on the screen are "real-ized" before their eyes and in their minds, their own lives become fictionalized, unreal. Their experiences have all the drama and passion of the movies but want the shaping power of an aesthetic vision to lend them clarity and wholeness. In contrast to the quietistic housewives' magazines, the movies portray a world in which heroics are daily events, and boldness and aggression, potentially fatal traits in the treacherous world of *them*, are always rewarded.

The joy, optimism, and promise of Loretta's youth, lost to her through events which she cannot comprehend, are associated in her mind with the movies. She watches films uncritically, too delightfully absorbed in the actions unfolding before her to judge them in any way. "Oh, it was real nice, I liked it fine," is her standard opening remark when discussing a movie she's seen (p. 106). She describes one movie at some length. The windup of the complicated plot, which pivots on the sudden financial collapse of a wealthy man, is "the stock market goes back up. The Butler marries one of the maids. . . . It ends all right" (p. 107). The contrast between the cinematic neatness of this ending and the maddening loose ends of Loretta's own life is obvious and she is not unaware of it. In a passage as poignant as it is passionate she tells her children: "I want to be like people in that movie, I want to know what I'm doing I wasn't meant to be like this—I mean, stuck here. Really I wasn't. I don't look like this. I mean, my hair, and I'm too fat. I don't really look like *this*, I look a different way" (p. 108). The violence of the "real" world has somehow distorted Loretta's true self; not only has her life not proceeded the way it was "supposed to," her very physical appearance is a deception. The real world has created a fictional Loretta whose "true" existence can be perceived only on the screen. Things do not seem to her as if they will end "all right"; Loretta is living episodes which in the edited world of film would have wound up on the cutting-room floor.

Not surprisingly, since he is her first and favorite child, Jules shares Loretta's fascination with the fictional world of the movies. We are told that "Much of Jules's life had come from the movies, much of his language and his good spirits" (p. 133). Jules's sense of himself as an individual predestined for good fortune can be traced directly back to his perception of himself as a fictional character. In his youth Jules "thought of himself as a character in a book being written by himself, a fictional fifteen-year-old with the capacity to become anything, because he was fiction. What couldn't he make out of himself?" (p. 99). His imagination "heated by the memory of movies," Jules continually distances himself from his life and comments on it as a spectator might. "This looks like Chapter One," he exclaims to himself when it seems as if Bernard Geffen is going to help him realize all his hopes (p. 235). "*This is Jules in Texas*," he thinks at one point, so alienated from his surroundings that he refers to himself, as he does repeatedly in the book, in the third person (p. 286). He lives an internal life once removed from external reality: "Endlessly Jules had pursued Jules, in endless stories and dreams ! . ." (p. 363). And, like Loretta, he has an inner sense of a "true Jules" to whom certain events and situations are grossly inappropriate, indeed, unreal, and betrayals of his essential self.

The extent to which Jules and Loretta view the world in which they move as unreal in some elemental way indicates how little their lives have measured up to

their expectations. They are intensely disappointed people. Denial is the only psychic mechanism which can keep them functional in the face of the catastrophes which characterize their lives. Jules's feeling that his "life is a story imagined by a madman" conveys fully how bizarre and frightening his existence seems to him (p. 255). Loretta's resiliency is the virtue of a woman who has been so battered by incessant blows that she cannot fully comprehend how appalling her life has been. As the novel goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that Jules's "optimism" is a delusion of psychotic proportions. His sense of his own unreality intensifies until he is convinced that he is "not a character in 'real life'" (p. 354).

Maureen Wendall also succumbs to the fictionalizing impulse so thematically prominent in *them*. As a schoolgirl, terrified by the nightmarish world which surrounds her, she turns to literature, particularly the novels of Jane Austen, for succor and release. Like Loretta and Jules, however, she perceives the structured world of fiction as real and her own life as false and insubstantial. Reading novels, Maureen feels like someone waking up from a horrible dream, escaping not from but into reality. Oates writes that Maureen "liked novels set in England. As soon as she read the first page of a novel by Jane Austen she was pleased, startled, excited to know that this was real: the world of this novel was real. Her own life, up over Elson's Drugs or back on Labrosse, could not be real" (pp. 165-66). For Maureen, the less like her own life these books are in tone, setting, and event, the more real they become.

Even the money which Maureen earns as a prostitute becomes associated in her mind with the literature she loves, the fantasy of freedom coupling with the fantasy of escape. The money she receives for her acts is described as being "as real as a novel by Jane Austen," and she hides it, significantly, in a book, *Poets of the New World*. In some magical way, her money will provide her life with the order and sense of reality that she experiences when reading fiction. She will live in a "New World"; her own life will be as "real" as an Austen novel. The irony, of course, is that the power of money to change Maureen's life is as real as an Austen novel, that is, not real at all, but fictional.

Though similar in her distrust of the reality of her own experiences, Maureen proves ultimately to be neither as vapid as her mother nor as psychotically deluded as Jules. Like them, she is intensely angry that her life will not sort itself out as precisely as a work of fiction, but she finally rebels against the conviction that her experiences are any less authentic for that reason. Her own maddening and disorganized life comes eventually to have full significance for her. She writes in one of her letters to Oates: "Why did you think that book about Madame Bovary was so important? All those books? Why did you tell us they were more important than life? They are not more important than my life" (p. 312). Maureen reviles Oates for her knowledge of literature, for "knowing so much that never happened," and against the claim that literature gives form to life asserts that, "I lived my life but there is no form to it. No shape" (p. 320).

Clearly, Maureen's vehemence is generated by her desire for control over her life, her wish for a "law. Something that will come back again and again, that I can understand" (p. 410). Maureen only begins to exercise some power over her fate, as morally questionable and precarious as that power is, when she refuses to persist in fictionalizing her life as Jules and Loretta do. By respecting and rooting herself in her own experiences, she shows that she has learned the most important lesson art has to teach. If, at the end of the book, Maureen's life is not as firmly grounded as she would like to think it is, nor her calculated stealing of another woman's husband in her pursuit of the suburban dream as elevated either in motive or goal as we would like, she is at least not being swept

along by the tide of events as directly as Loretta and Jules are. It is significant that she is virtually unaffected by the Detroit riots which burn down her mother's home and turn her brother into a murderer. Though Maureen does not realize it, *Madame Bovary* and the novels of Austen have helped her achieve what grade-B movies and housewives' magazines never can provide: a sense of the dignity and importance of her own life.

Robert H. Fossum has argued rightly in asserting that Oates's fiction "evokes an overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life which produce our obsessions and frustrations, our dreams of love and power, our struggles to understand the world and ourselves."³ Oates renders convincingly the psychological impulse of individuals to turn to fictional forms for meaning, indeed, to attempt to fictionalize their own lives, in the face of appalling social conditions. It is nonetheless regrettable that political analyses and solutions are treated with as little grace and insight as they are in *them*, a novel so much concerned, both explicitly and indirectly, with such social issues as urban decay, poverty, race relations, violence, and the urgent flight by white people from the inner city to the suburbs. Mort Piercy, the most important political figure in the book, is depicted as an overgrown, spoiled, upper-middle-class child, quite probably insane, who wages an irresponsible war against the "Establishment" on government Poverty Program grants. His friends are privileged University "radicals" with frightening delusions of grandeur. Whatever idealism they exhibit is quickly revealed to be a shallow cover for paranoia and repressed sociopathic impulses. Their political discussions never address real issues but revolve around whether, during the Detroit riots, it would be more in the interest of the revolution to assassinate President Johnson or murder Martin Luther King and blame it on the right wing. Most disturbing of all, Oates clearly suggests that the Detroit riots were organized and orchestrated from behind the scenes by a small band of cynical and deluded whites of whom Mort Piercy is only the most prominent example.

Yet, despite the caricaturish treatment of politics in *them*, Oates seems to demand by her very choice of title some discussion of a collective solution to the problems which the novel assumes as its subject. The radical alienation of characters from themselves, the condition which is expressed by their fictionalizing their own lives, can be seen as the reflection within the individual of a society whose various classes and races regard each other as threatening and monolithic "them." Oates maintains that her novel "is truly about a specific 'them' and not just a literary technique of pointing to us all" (Author's Note). But the specificity of the referent for "them" seems to shift as the psychological and the social intermingle, and every individual and social group projects their problems, obsessions, and terrors onto a certain "them." "Them niggers" serve such a function for several of the white characters in the book. Jules's upper-class girlfriend, Nadine, frightened and disgusted by the sexual cravings which Jules awakens in her, is tormented by irrational fears that he has slept with diseased black girls and will infect her. Maureen Wendall moves out of Detroit after marrying Jim Randolph to get away from her past and "them" (specifically, here, her family and the psychological forces and social class which they represent), but Jules tracks her down and she does not know how to answer him when he asks, "But, honey, aren't you one of *them* yourself?" (p. 478). Oates's characters, like all of us, carry within themselves psychological versions of the social problems which surround them. That in her sharp and incisive focus on the psychological Oates does not take similar care with the social is a disservice both to them and her audience.

³Robert H. Fossum, "Only Control: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates," *Studies in the Novel*, 7 (1975), 285.

By the end of *them* we are left with both the possibility of stagnation and the hope for change. To recommend narrow solutions to the complex issues which the novel raises would be a great mistake and Oates carefully avoids doing so. While asserting the necessity that Oates acknowledge the social context of her work in a responsible way, I recognize that she should not be held to any ideological line. Like other contemporary novelists of worth, Oates realizes that we are not always better off for our painful experiences, that suffering and disaster do not always lead us to self-discovery but often leave us constricted, terrified of change and what the future holds, doubtful about the substantiality of our experiences. She knows that perhaps the most dreadful thing about apocalyptic events is that too often they do not destroy us but leave us to face another "ordinary morning." The instinct for survival becomes a virtue in this connection. And to the extent to which her characters can survive without dividing the world of others into "them" and us, and fictionalizing their own lives, they have done very well indeed.