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Unlocking a life split in two but not in half: An analytical and pedagogical
examination of Joyce Carol Oates' *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*

by

Rebecca Anne Weber

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Major Professor: Brenda O. Daly

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1998

Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Rebecca Anne Weber

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

To those who have told me that I am a writer

and especially

To those who send the cookies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. EXAMINING A WANDERING MOTHERHOOD	19
CHAPTER 3. TRACKING A SHIFTING NARRATIVE VOICE	35
CHAPTER 4. OBSERVING RACE	43
CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING	52
NOTES	60
WORKS CITED	65

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why contemporary American writer Joyce Carol Oates' 1990 novella *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* is not taught in secondary and post-secondary classrooms. Oates' writing is frank, her voice feminist while echoing more traditional works that have broken into literary canons; however, the main reason why *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* is not taught is that it is a relatively new text, and, thus, ways in which to teach it have not yet been explored.

There are many reasons why Oates' novella should be taught in the classroom. Her language is poetic, and her story, a revision of sorts of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, is complex, offering windows into history and contemporary questions of gender roles, racism, and social class distinctions. When studied within the context of the texts it echoes, *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* can offer ways through which students might examine how texts comment upon each other.

One aspect of Oates' work that needs to be fully examined within a classroom is her focus on the definition of a woman and a mother. The narration of the story takes place years after its main action, which occurs in 1912. Examining the shifting narrative in the novella, a position which

is sometimes held by the protagonist's granddaughter, is as interesting as examining the moral codes present in the text as they differ depending upon the time, gender, race, and social class of the characters.

While unlocking *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* in a classroom will be difficult, focusing upon new ways through which to teach new literature can certainly aid a classroom examination of Oates' wonderfully complex text. Exploring the historical context of the novella as well as the social questions prompted by *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* can lead students toward a sophisticated reading of the text.

CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

While different works and various general themes and writing practices of Joyce Carol Oates have received critical academic attention, not much has been said, at least in a written academic forum, about Oates' 1990 novella *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. The novella, part of a trilogy with novelle *Black Water* (1992) and *The Rise of Life on Earth* (1991), has almost escaped critical comment.¹ In "The Novellas of Joyce Carol Oates" published within Greg Johnson's *Joyce Carol Oates: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1994), Robert McPhillips offers a brief examination of the lyrical qualities of Oates' language in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. McPhillips also mentions that the novel is inspired by the 1891 Fernand Khnopff painting of the same name. Further, he briefly examines the connections between the novella and Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1898-1899). While McPhillips believes *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* "is best read as a companion volume to Oates' *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*" (198), he missed the opportunity to examine thematic ties, including the nature of mothers and motherhood. These themes may, perhaps, be more readily perceived through a comparison of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* and Oates' short work

First Love, which was published in 1996, two years after the publication of McPhillips' article.²

While McPhillips' comments have certain merit, one cannot overlook the brevity of treatment of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. In his article, McPhillips covers critical reaction to Joyce Carol Oates' short fiction in a short section of a book that also examines some general themes in Oates' work as well as her self-created Eden County, New York, the setting for many of her works.³ McPhillips simply does not have the scope to examine in detail *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*.

This thesis will examine *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* in detail; in my examination of some themes of the text I am aiming to make the text more accessible to advanced secondary-level teachers and thus to students of the text. I expect the audience for this work would be the sort of readership a periodical like *English Journal* would attract; thus, I am writing this thesis with advanced secondary educators in mind. I am assuming they may have some background in different forms of literary and pedagogical theory, but I am also assuming that they may not be well versed in particular theoretical terminology. This thesis, then, will retain the focus on literary and pedagogical theory without employing the specific terminology of those fields.

Offering a Brief Plot Summary

I Lock My Door Upon Myself is the story of Edith Margaret Freilicht, or Calla Honeystone, as told by Calla's granddaughter. Much of the action in the text takes place in rural upstate New York in 1912, though most of this action is imagined and interpreted by the granddaughter-narrator years later. Calla is headstrong, and her demeanor is not changed when her relatives marry her off, at age seventeen, to a thirty-nine year-old bachelor.

Calla enters the Freilicht household, the household of her in-laws, which is filled with female relatives who are critical of Calla's "unladylike" wanderings through woods and fields. At first, Calla resists motherhood, fighting physically with her husband in order to keep him from having the chance to impregnate her. Later, she bears three children for her husband but continues to wander, drawing criticism from her female relatives and especially from her mother-in-law for her lack of demonstrated mothering instinct.

Calla is wandering when she first sees Tyrell Thompson, an African-American water dowser. Later, the two meet, and they, as mutual outcasts, instantly draw each other into a passionate relationship. This relationship continues until the couple, pregnant and certain that their relationship is not one that would be tolerated within that time and place, challenge each

other to a double suicide. The couple, amid shouts of warning from the townspeople on the riverbanks, take a stolen row boat over Tintern falls. Calla lives; Tyrell dies, but whether he dies from injuries he sustained or whether the townspeople who rescued Calla had a part in Thompson's death is unclear.

Calla mends physically under the protective care of her mother-in-law and grows old within the seclusion of her room within the Freilicht farmhouse. The granddaughter-narrator, whose life overlaps Calla's, tells the story in an effort to understand Calla's motives for seemingly locking her door upon herself.

Entering the Canon Debate

From the onset, anyone advocating the teaching of fiction by Joyce Carol Oates, and especially a scholar who advocates teaching the novella *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* at the secondary or even at the post-secondary level, will encounter problems and resistance. The first problem is that Oates is a writer from the United States. While post-secondary and some secondary canons have been opening up to allow as much American literature as any other sort of literature, and while some courses certainly focus specifically on American literature, there remain some educators and

administrators in secondary schools who, with Anglophilic glee, prefer to concentrate the bulk of students' literary education on older literatures, literatures they believe have some history to them, some tradition, some heritage. According to these Anglophiles, Oates' fiction lacks this history simply because she is American.⁴ Further, some educators would object to teaching fiction by Oates because she is contemporary and, complicating matters, is still alive and working, publishing novels or other major works at the rate of about one per year. Finally, Oates is female, which is why, in keeping with a long academic tradition of discrediting or overlooking the work of females, some people would argue to keep her out of many literary canons, particularly in secondary schools.⁵

Although *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* was originally published in 1990, those who would argue that the novella lacks literary tradition are mistaken. In fact, this ideological block blinds these readers to the very conscious echoes through which Oates builds the literary tradition into her text.⁶ The most practical reason why *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* might not be taught is because educators, many of them having completed their formal training before 1990, have not read the novella, and certainly have not studied it in an educational setting, either as possible teachers of the work or as students of the work. These educators, most probably, have not

studied how to highlight the wonderful aspects of both contemporary literature and literatures produced by women; thus, these educators would not necessarily know how to effectively teach a work by Oates.⁷

So often, literary canons, or at least the works selected to be taught in the classroom, are determined by the familiarity educators have with works and with ways through which they could teach those works. For example, as high school sophomores, many educators studied William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* themselves. The same educators-to-be oftentimes, even with multicultural education courses aiming to shape their educational lenses, learn to teach literature with the idea that they will teach *Lord of the Flies* just as and in the same ways through which *Lord of the Flies* was taught to them. When these educators go into school districts that advocate the teaching of *Lord of the Flies*, and when a binder full of *Lord of the Flies* activities is passed down to new teachers, generations upon generations of high school students read *Lord of the Flies*.⁸ Admittedly, this is a cynical and incomplete view of the educational system; certainly, there are schools, educators, and educational training programs that are opening up the curricula of high schools. However, this perpetuation of tired texts continues, more often than not, in the public schools.⁹

While educators are the people who have the opportunity to halt this perpetuation of tired texts, the fault of this perpetuation is not completely theirs. Placing the responsibility of opening the high school canon completely on the teachers of English, as Harold H. Kolb, Jr. mentions in his essay "Defining the Canon," is unfair. Kolb points out how high school teachers are often locked into jobs which "provide neither the time nor the opportunity nor the resources to increase their mastery of content" (43). To significantly diversify a curriculum, or even to actively reaffirm a more traditional curriculum, members of English departments, both in high schools and in colleges, must first recognize the need to re-examine the curricula that particular schools may have been using for years—the curricula for which teachers have ready-scripted class sessions and dated, yet annually resurrected, materials on file. Sadly, many secondary instructors and administrators, and even some university-level educators, have not entered the canon debate; still more would be unable to suggest works that fall beyond the realm of what they have always taught, since what they have always taught often mimics what they have always read. Even if a department could agree on a curriculum revision that would accommodate both the school schedule and that state's educational requirements for certain courses, instructors in these schools would need to

develop background in both the literary works added to the curriculum and the methods most effective in teaching these works. In order to properly train instructors, school districts would have to hire experts in the teaching of more diverse and more contemporary literatures to offer a series of in-service programs. School districts might also need to require and fund night or summer courses for teachers. All of this, of course, takes time from the teachers' schedules, time that teachers would have to give at the expense of the courses they are already teaching.

Overall, while rethinking an exclusive secondary curriculum is necessary, the revision process can be long and expensive, and might, without proper support, alienate the faculty members most in need of rethinking the content, materials, and practices of their instruction. Also, when diversifying the canon is attempted, it is often attempted as though texts written in different times and showcasing different voices can be effectively experienced and taught within the same literary studies frameworks that have sometimes defined those texts as inadequate.¹⁰ This definition needs to open up if texts by women, people of color, and contemporary writers are to be experienced and valued fully in today's literature classrooms.

Why the Study of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* Is Worthwhile

People who claim that *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* could not possibly evoke a strong literary tradition have not considered the text's echoes of some already established literary works. McPhillips mentions that *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* seems to be a revision of Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. In this revision, both texts are set in about the same time and in the same sort of dire socio-economic circumstances, complete with eerie references in both to an old sawmill and to selling off the family farm's fertile land, which happens to Calla Honeystone's family after her mother dies and happens to Ethan Frome's family after he and Mattie take their fateful snow-sled plunge down a hill into a tree. In another undeniable echo of Wharton's work, Calla and her African-American lover, Tyrell Thompson, take a rowboat over Tintern Falls, the same sort of plunge Ethan and Mattie take while sledding down a steep hill, aiming to hit the tree at the bottom. In contrast to Wharton, however, Oates has created a female, Calla, who is a stronger-willed version of Ethan. Perhaps the main difference in these texts, aside from the switching of genders of the protagonists, is the added complication of race. Oates presents a situation where, in 1912 rural upstate New York, a married Caucasian woman is having a public affair with an African-American male whose marital status

is unknown yet often pondered. This addition of race to the equation results in a different outcome to the events. While Ethan and Mattie both live, forever scarred physically, mentally, and emotionally by their leap of love, Calla and Tyrell do not both suffer that fate. While Calla is pulled from the boat's wreckage at the base of the falls and heals physically to lead a life "split in two but not in half, the weight of it in the past and all that remained a protracted repetition of minutes, of space" (88), Tyrell dies in the crash over the falls, whether from immediate death in the accident or from the acts of the townsmen purposefully allowing him to drown is uncertain (87).

Within *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, Oates also echoes the literary forms of some canonical works. In his article "A Barbarous Eden: Joyce Carol Oates's First Collection," Greg Johnson mentions the connection between Oates and Faulkner in their use of created counties for the setting of their fiction; however, Johnson does not explore echoes of Faulkner in Oates' work beyond this setting device (1). In a curious echo of both *Ethan Frome* and Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* uses reported speech. Just as Faulkner and Wharton write from the point of view of the town as a collective whole, Oates offers the views of a collective townspeople in speech that is reported, though never directly

quoted. In both Faulkner's short story and Oates' novella, these viewpoints of the collective townspeople act to report the moral conventions of a particular time and place. Also, the structure of Oates' sentences sometimes mirrors the style of Faulkner, especially in her use of long sentences that span pages and sometimes whole chapters.

Oates' narrative strategy differs from Faulkner's, however, in the sense that, like Wharton, she has an outsider as a narrator. Calla's granddaughter, the main narrator of the text, has returned to the area where Calla lives, yet the granddaughter is still an outsider. Further, her family secrets are as guarded from her as they would be limited to people from outside her family. The granddaughter reveals her lack of insider status, even within her own family:

How have I come by this knowledge: by way of fragments, whispers, half-heard reproaches. In point of fact as I was growing up I heard of my mother's mother the "crazy" woman as much from girlfriends and from their mothers as I did from my own mother, for to her, Emmaline, the mystery of Calla Honeystone was a deep and abiding embarrassment. (86)

With this knowledge, it is easy to compare the granddaughter's narrator-status with that of the unnamed male narrator in Edith Wharton's *Ethan*

Frome. Wharton's narrator, like Oates', needs to piece together that which he hears and observes. In another obvious parallel, both Oates and Wharton employ the narrative strategy of offering the collective and unattributed gossip of the townspeople within italicized sections of text.

I Lock My Door Upon Myself also has strong connections to other canonical works, as explained below, because its main character is a woman who is trying, to some extent, to escape an oppressive marriage and lethargic motherhood. Rather than support her for a few years, Calla's relatives marry her off to a rather unattractive thirty-nine year-old bachelor when she is seventeen years old (14-15). While Calla does eventually bear three children in her marriage, and she is pregnant with Thompson's baby when she goes over the falls, she does not fit the description of what the townspeople would consider a "natural" mother.¹¹ At one point, Calla suggests to her husband that she leave the Freilicht family, being no real mother to her children and their marriage being loveless (71). While Calla, having mostly healed physiologically, returns physically to the Freilicht family after going over the falls in the shattering rowboat, she never, before or after her affair with Thompson, opens herself emotionally to either her husband or her children. In this sense, she avoids both marriage and motherhood.

However, when positioned in a framework of other female literary characters who feel imprisoned by marriage and/or motherhood, Calla does not seem as radical as she might appear outside of this context. Nora in Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" does not want to be a wife and mother until she is strong and independent enough to believe that she can mother properly. Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* drowns herself because there is no socially acceptable way for her to avoid being a "good" wife and mother. The woman holding narrative voice in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," while suffering from post-partum depression, is locked away in an attic where she is not supposed to be writing in the hope that she will get well, and at the very least with the knowledge that she cannot be a "bad" mother while she is locked away in the attic.

Calla is all of these women at once. Her few feelings of favor toward her husband, George Freilicht, are feelings of pity. She seemingly has no feelings for motherhood, or at least for motherhood regarding her children by Freilicht.¹² She resents pregnancy, especially her last complete pregnancy which left her weak and ill with infection for a long time afterward. Otherwise, she does not despise her children; she never really wants them, never really feels connection to them more than anyone would generally be expected to feel about anyone else's children. Calla does not

feel emotionally connected with her children, aside from her unborn child with Thompson; she views them as beings who merely occupied her womb for nine months, as much as by happenstance as by anything else.

Calla's trip over the falls is as much a recognition of the impossibility of the life she would wish to live as Tyrell Thompson's passionate lover as it is an act to permanently escape criticism for her refusal to play the socially-defined roles of wife and mother. After Calla's trip over the falls, she does not really escape the socially-defined roles she is to play within marriage and motherhood--she had already escaped those, at least in act, by ignoring social conventions. Her husband, Freilicht, did not really want to be married anyway, so he does not miss her as a wife, especially since she never fit the socially-defined role of a wife to begin with. Similarly, since her children were mothered almost exclusively by Calla's mother-in-law and the other female relatives living in the Freilicht household before Calla's trip over the falls, it was no different for her to not be a mother when Calla locks her door upon herself physically, not just emotionally, after her trip over the waterfall. The Freilicht household as a whole does not miss Calla because, since she was never really the head of the household and since she had continued her mute, feverish, household labor after her legs healed, her position within the house had never changed. Like the autobiographical

speaker in Dickinson's "The Soul Selects Her Own Society," Calla selects one person, Tyrell Thompson:

The soul selects her own Society--

Then--shuts the Door--

To her divine Majority--

Present no more--

.....

I've known her--from an ample

nation--

Choose one--

Then--close the Valves of her

attention--

Like Stone-- (1004)

It is no mistake or coincidence, that Calla's last name is *Honeystone*. Even after she legally takes on "Freilicht" as her married last name, Calla still refers to herself as Calla Honeystone, and her granddaughter/narrator does the same. Calla also insists that Tyrell Thompson refer to her as Calla even though she never shares this wish of naming with her husband, who never suspects that she does not want to be Mrs. Edith Freilicht.

Defending *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* As "Good" Literature

Within a tradition of more canonical texts, Joyce Carol Oates' *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* carries value according to the standards of different types of Formalist criticism. However, critics, both academic and popular, have charged that the sheer volume of Oates' literature must somehow debase its quality. These critics have reasoned that Oates' work cannot have literary merit simply because, as they see it, Oates produces too many works of literature. They also have attacked Oates' writing process, charging that she must not spend much time revising her work if she can manage to release such a large volume of printed material into the world.¹³

However, Oates' writing and editing processes have been examined, and these accusations have been rendered misguided. In *A Piece of Work: Five Writers Discuss Their Revisions*, edited by Jay Woodruff, Oates reveals in an interview how she often revises her short stories even between their first publication and their inclusion in subsequent anthologies (170). Included with this interview are a published version of Oates' short story "Naked" along with handwritten notes from early in her writing process, a copy of a preliminary draft written in long-hand, and an early typewritten version of the story, complete with editing notes. This chronicling of Oates' writing process has been enough to convince some skeptics of her earned literary

merit. For those who remain skeptical, Oates says of her editing process:

It's a slow, painstaking, perhaps needlessly fastidious process, involving, as you've [Woodruff, the interviewer] gathered, not only revision and rewriting but retyping. In this way I cultivate the "voice" of the narrative, I suppose. . . .The process is extremely slow, and requires many hours. So I'm continually surprised by critics' assumptions that I write quickly and that it is somehow "easy." (170-171)

Adding to the argument of the Formalist value of Oates' literature is McPhillips who notes the lyricism of language in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. Using the opening scene of the novella as a sample for his examination of language, McPhillips recognizes the "subtlety of its language, which sings like poetry from its very first lines" (Johnson, 198). From there his brief examination extols the aesthetics of language, noting her use of consonance and assonance to "simulate the boat's choppy but steady movement in the river" and her use of soft and hard sounds to point out the "contrasting white and black," attesting "to the extreme emotion contained in the scene, the white woman and black man locked in a defiant tableau for anyone on shore to observe" (199).

This scene of Calla and Tyrell going toward and over the waterfall is repeated three times within the novella as the granddaughter-narrator reimagines the scene. The first telling, placed at the very beginning of the novella, gives a romanticized version of the story, one that takes place without any indication that Calla lived through the experience. This first telling fits within the tradition of suicidal lovers in Western literature.¹⁴ The later tellings, informed by characterizations of the suicidal couple and of Calla's survival, fall away from the romantic conventions of the dramatic plunge of suicidal lovers.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this discussion of the aesthetic quality of Oates' writing, as well as the earlier discussions of Oates' writing and revising processes, of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself's* echoes of canonical works, and of the canon debate generally, has been forceful enough to demonstrate that Oates' novella is literature worthy of teaching at the secondary or post-secondary levels. What follows is an examination of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, one which aims to examine some of the more interesting themes and devices working in Oates' novella. A further examination of the implications of teaching *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* is included at the end of this work.

CHAPTER 2.

EXAMINING A WANDERING MOTHERHOOD

In *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, Calla Honeystone, or Mrs. Edith Freilicht, as she is referred to by everyone in the text except herself, her lover Tyrell Thompson, and her sometimes-narrator granddaughter, wanders. Calla wanders back to her original home, foreclosed upon and boarded up. Even before she meets Thompson, and even before she is married, she wanders, through fields, through woods. Calla started wandering young:

Often she stayed out from school to tramp about the fields and woods and along the creek, gone sometimes for entire days when she'd show up at a neighbor's farm like a stray cat or dog *Oh is it Edith Honeystone?* and she'd say *I'm Calla* in that low assured matter-of-fact voice, not so much certain of herself and of her welcome as indifferent; simply not caring; as ready to turn and wander back into the woods as to come into a house and be fed like a normal child. (8)

This early wandering, while part of the reason why Calla's family wanted to marry her off quickly before word spread of her "unladylike"

tramping in woods and across fields, would not have haunted Calla had she left her wandering behind when she entered marriage, in 1907 and at seventeen years of age, with a thirty-nine-year old man with an established and critical extended family. Calla gives up her wandering during the first weeks of her marriage and makes an effort to be a wife, to fit in with her husband's relatives who "did not know what to make of her, their George's young wife. They had thought they would like her, now they were not so sure" (21). One summer day Calla, having completed some housework, seemingly wanders from wifedom, stealing away to her old home, boarded up and filled with the skeletons of birds and rodents. There Calla

fell into a dazzling sleep and dreamed that, yes, they were here, not only her Shaheen relatives but the man who was her husband, calling *Edith? Oh--Edith?* as one might call a sick person who was also dangerous, and even as she dreamed they were here to return her against her will to that other place, they came for her, and did. (25)

Battling Against Motherhood

Calla had only wifedom from which to wander in those early weeks. As her marriage continued, Freilicht steeled himself to claim the right he

felt he had to Calla's body. Calla, perhaps because she is from a lower social class, does not have the luxury of control over her body that middle- and upper-class women sometimes held. Although if a woman "interfered with her husband's right to her body, she offended him as a man and a potential father," (Ogden 81), there were ways in which women could exercise control over their reproductive capabilities. Even if women in Calla's time could not access information regarding of specific birth control methods, one way middle- and upper-class women could assert their reproductive rights was by "using veto maneuvers or sexual intercourse by invitation only--*her* invitation" (Ogden 84, emphasis original). These veto maneuvers included feigning illness and weakness, conditions that, as these women pointed out to their husbands, would not allow a healthy pregnancy.

Calla, a woman of the rural lower-class, does not feign illness, perhaps cannot feign illness. Instead, she uses her hard strength to beat off her husband in nightly, wordless, bedroom battles. Freilicht, having taken to drinking, forces himself upon Calla, but "Calla was too quick for him, too strong, using her elbows and knees and fingernails and even her head for butting so that she was able to force him from her, triumphant" (25).

All through the first summer of their marriage, this sexual battle continues, with Calla rejoicing

in her tender bruised breasts and belly; the discolored flesh of her upper arms and muscular thighs; her backbone that ached from that grim nightly grappling: surveying herself with satisfaction, in secret, knowing that he, the despised husband, was mirrored to her, equally bruised and battered, yet truly humbled as Calla was not. (27)

Calla continues to ward off her husband until, one day, feeling pity on her husband and being "moved by her own impulsive magnanimity," Calla smiles as an invitation to her husband. While the novella does not describe how her husband, staring at Calla "as if unwilling to believe his eyes" reacts, immediately after that passage are these words, presumably in Calla's voice: "*So I weakened, and I died. And my children pushed forward to be born*" (28, emphasis original).

Sexual relations between Calla and her husband end shortly after Calla gives birth to three children in little more than three years. In describing her pregnancies, especially the third pregnancy which leaves Calla ill and weakened with infection, and also in describing early motherhood, the text again offers Calla's own voice, wavering between, "I

am drowning, that is what this is," and "I am not drowning, really. I will swim free" (29, emphasis original).

A "Bad" Mother Defined

Her children born, Calla again begins wandering, for hours at a time, in all weather, without troubling to tell people where she is going. In the context of her wanderings, and in the context of her behavior when she is home, it does not take long for Calla to be criticized as a mother:

A boy, another boy, a girl: and it began to be whispered that Edith Freilicht was not a natural mother, surely there was something wrong with her, how readily she allowed the care of her babies to fall into others' hands, how painful she found nursing them at the breast, and how clumsy, how strained, how vague her manner with them as if they presented to her, in all their mindless heated baby-flesh, the most incomprehensible of riddles. (29)

While these charges of Calla's bad mothering are not attributed to her female Freilicht relatives, it is apparent from later criticism that they are the likely judges of Calla's mothering skills. However, even when no one is really criticizing Calla, her lack of mothering activity and instinct comes

through in the context of society's--both then and now--standards:

How could it be said that she was "cold," unfeeling,"
"unnatural"--a "bad" mother? Yet the truth was, when Calla
was not in the room with her children she tended to forget
them. (33)

Calla herself demonstrates her lack of emotionally connection with her children. After spending Easter Sunday visiting a Freilicht cousin's farm where Calla's indifference to her children provoked comment, Calla's husband criticized her lack of motherly activities, not her lack as displayed in the home, but the lack she displayed in front of company. To this criticism Calla responds, "unthinking, immediate, with the air of a child who cannot be relied upon not to speak the obvious, 'Oh--but I didn't really want them, I thought *you* did'" (33, emphasis original).

Calla is free to be a "bad" mother in part because there are so many Freilicht females living with her and her husband. These females, "lacking their own or having seen their own children grow up too swiftly," were "not only willing but grateful to take care of babies" (33). So when Calla was not being a "good" mother, her children were mothered enough by everyone from Calla's mother-in-law to her husband's aunts, sisters, and cousins. Perhaps Calla gained some physical freedom in this arrangement, and

perhaps she also gained some defense against criticism in that her children, though not mothered by her, were still mothered. However, the passing of her mothering duties to others allowed for even more pointed criticism of Calla, even from those who benefitted from Calla's inattention to her children:

And what perverse pleasure in the arrangement: that Mrs. Freilicht had the satisfaction of tending to her grandchildren as well as the satisfaction of complaining bitterly of the children's mother. (33)

While other female Freilicht relatives also benefitted from this arrangement of nurturing Calla's children while also criticizing Calla for not nurturing her own children, Calla's mother-in-law is the clearest example of someone benefitting two-fold from Calla's avoidance of the acts of motherhood.

Linking Motherhood to Womanhood

When Calla's mothering abilities and interests are criticized by her female relatives, the criticism is not only waged against Calla as a mother, but also extends to Calla's ability to fit a definition of womanhood. In *Beyond Her Sphere*, Barbara J. Harris claims that the Victorian cult of true womanhood was a compound of four ideas, each necessary for true

womanhood:

a sharp dichotomy between the home and the economic world outside that paralleled a sharp contrast between female and male natures, the designation of the home as the female's only proper sphere, the moral superiority of woman, and the idealization of her function as mother. (33)

In addition to these four qualifications, a woman was to expand her spirituality, particularly her Christianity, to offer the home as a place where her husband could find "shelter from the anxieties of modern society and a sanctuary for moral and spiritual values that could not survive outside the domestic circle" (33).

While the years in which Calla attracts criticism as a young mother are 1908 through 1912, and though her family is not of the middle or upper classes, these nineteenth-century Victorian definitions of a proper woman and mother still function within the text as a basis of moral judgment of Calla. Under these conditions for true womanhood, Calla does not rate well, especially in her younger years, but also even after she heals physically from her injuries sustained from going over the waterfall

While Calla adheres to the female world of the home, set in opposition to the marketplace, as demonstrated by her lack of knowledge

of the value of money when she tries determine how much to pay Tyrell Thompson for his water divining services (50), she does not adhere to a sharp contrast between what are described as male and female natures. Calla is headstrong, and she leaves convention and tact behind when their ends do not suit her. She is physically strong, and she fights back. When her husband, in a drunken rage and holding a loaded double-barrel shotgun, hits her full in the face and knocks her, bleeding, to the floor, Calla does not cower. She instead grabs the fire poker and prepares for a battle that might resemble her earlier bedroom battles (60). Earlier, Calla, tired of being on the receiving end of her eighth grade teacher's disciplinary willow branch, had snatched the branch from her teacher's hands and struck her in the face with it "with such alacrity and aplomb the other students, even the six-foot-tall farm boys at the rear of the classroom, were astonished" (9).

While Calla's married home may be what is judged by the townspeople in the text and Calla's in-laws to be her proper sphere, there is no ignoring the fact that Calla, by her own design, by her mother-in-law's design, or by a combination of both women's designs, never really becomes the head of the Freilicht household. Even after her trip over the waterfall, Calla does housework, hard laboring housework, with feverish

determination, but she completes these tasks as though she were, as the child of her mother-in-law, doing her assigned chores. Calla is never in position to direct the housework, and both Calla and her mother-in-law operate without hesitation under these circumstances. Further, in her wanderings before her trip over the waterfall, Calla had ventured far from her domestic sphere, tramping across field and forest, and always returns home not minding that she has not washed her hair in weeks, not minding the "faint warm rank animal smell" she emits, not minding wearing her worst dirty and frayed clothes.

Calla clearly does not fit any idealization of motherhood, and her self-designation as morally and spiritually superior, while perhaps true according to her morals and personalization of religion, does not hold up in the context of the standards by which she is judged. Her physical dirtiness is in part the basis of her being judged as immoral. Adding to this dirtiness is Calla's renunciation of recognized forms of religion. While, for a time, Calla does passionately embrace the sort of religion offered her by formal church services and Sunday school, shortly after her marriage she renounces formalized religion, attending church service only when forced. Her internalization of religion, demonstrated by italicized text throughout *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* that represents Calla's thoughts, varies from

renouncing God and Jesus altogether to appropriating religion for her own definitions of life.

While Calla's religious beliefs and behavior, not known to the general public, mark her as marginally moral, her sexual behavior and lust mark her as dangerous, as uncontrolled, as deviant. Examining the delineation of sexual mores within socio-sexual attitudes, Harris is quick to point out the gender assignments of passion:

Like traditional Christian thinkers, the Victorians tended to equate sin with sexual offenses and to see lust as a major cause of human misery and wrongdoing. Unlike them, however, the Victorians associated passion with men rather than women. They believe females had little, if any, sexual drive. . . .The nineteenth century distinguished sharply between sexual and maternal instincts. Since sexuality was part of humanity's animal nature, men were closer to beasts than women and more prone to sin. Women's asexuality elevated them in the hierarchy of nature and identified them with moral purity.

(41)

This notion of sexuality delineated roles based upon gender. Males were assumed to be the active partner in sexual relations, and the morally pure

women were assumed to be entirely passive, submitting to their husbands because "it was their duty to bear children and to allow their mates to use their bodies as an outlet for male lust" (Harris 42). Women were not supposed to initiate sex or to have an active part in intercourse. Further, as Harris points out, "Whatever they felt, respectable ladies did not admit to enjoying sex: to do so would have raised questions about their character and virtue" (42).

Calla's life does not fall within the Victorian era; however, these societal standards regarding gender roles and sexuality are operating within *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. Women were supposed to see sex as necessary for the production of children and the appeasement of husbands. While Calla does engage in sex so she can birth children for her husband, she limits her husband's access to her body by not allowing him to have sex with her at all both before she decides to have children and after the children are born. When she is criticized as a bad mother to her children, then, Calla is not engaging in sexual activities within her marriage. She is, however, engaged in sex outside of marriage, which is judged as both a crime and a sin. Even worse, when she has Tyrell Thompson as a partner, Calla desires sex, actively participates in sex, and enjoys sex. According to William Lee Howard, M.D. in his article "Effeminate Men and Masculine

Women," originally published in the *New York Medical Journal* in 1900, Calla fits the exact description of "that disgusting antisocial being, the female sexual pervert" (339). Howard draws lines, though, between judging single and married women, and between judging married women with and without children:

When a [single] woman neglects her maternal instincts, when her sentiment and dainty feminine characteristics are boldly and ostentatiously kept submerged, we can see an antisocial creature more amusing than dangerous. When such a woman marries, which she often does for the privileges derived from attaching Mrs. to her name, the husband is certain to be one she can rule, govern, and cause to follow in her voice and action. Should this female be unfortunate enough to become a mother, she ceases to be merely amusing, and is an antisocial being. She is then a menace to civilization, a producer of nonentities, the mother of mental and physical monstrosities who exist as a class of true degenerates until disgusted Nature, no longer tolerant of the woman who would be a man, or the man who would be a woman, allows them to shrink unto death. (339)

Calla, when entering into her marriage, believes that she is clever enough to outwit her husband, and even thinks to herself, "*I can keep my distance from that one!*" (14, emphasis original). While she is correct to an extent--except for the battling over sex and then the sex for reproduction sake she keeps him away from her physically, and the distance at which she always keeps him emotionally is substantial--Calla is still judged negatively for this distance. Calla does not really dominate her husband; rather, her triumphs in their sexual struggles aside, they both avoid each other more than anything. Howard's more pointed condemnation of women like Calla comes with motherhood; while married women are allowed some leeway in definition of gender rolls, he would rather mothers meet his definition of asexual femininity.

Calla, therefore, cannot in her time, and perhaps cannot even now, fit society's definitions of a woman and of a mother. While she in some ways escapes actual motherhood and womanhood with her behaviors and attitudes that defy the categorizations of motherhood and womanhood, doing so does not allow her to escape categorization. Lacking socially acceptable traits, Calla attracts different labels from her mother-in-law, her husband, her neighbors, and the collective town voices: She is a "bad" mother, even though, in reality, she is no mother at all. She is a "common

slut." She is "white trash." When her husband is drunk, he, a man of few words, manages to call her a whore. Calla is also deemed an animal by her female relations partially as a result of her outdoor wanderings and slovenly personal appearance, and partially as a response to her rumored passionate sexuality.

In all of the examples of reported speech that criticize Calla's moral standards, there is one passage that, with its jolt of feminism, sticks out as a more contemporary voice and as, most likely, the direct voice of Joyce Carol Oates masked as the voice of the more contemporary granddaughter-narrator. Within a moralizing passage presenting gossip regarding how, after her trip over the waterfall, Calla locked her door and would not let anyone, not even her children in to see her, Oates feels a need to interject:

And that's the insult of it, how always it comes back to a woman being a "good" mother in the world's eyes or a "bad" mother, how everything in a woman's life is funneled through her body between her legs. (63)

This is certainly a pointed commentary offered within the otherwise less passionate voice of the granddaughter/narrator. Within the context of the notions of motherhood, womanhood, femininity and sexuality that are operating within the text, a paradox and a dichotomy both exist. The paradox is that women, if they are feminine enough and are good mothers

and have sex only in marriage, if they have sex at all and then only if they do not enjoy it, can reach a status of purity, a status of dichotomous virgin; the opposite of that being, in the literary tradition, a whore. A woman can be asexual and virginal if she has had children and if she continues to have pleasureless sex safely within the confines of marriage. Similar to that paradox is the notion that "unfeminine" females, even if they have never been sexually active, can be denounced as not women, as not the material for motherhood, as whores. A woman cannot be a mother if she fits the definition of a whore. A woman cannot be a whore if she fits the definition of a mother. To fit the definition of a woman, a female must be a good mother. To fit the definition of a good mother, a female must be a woman. In a way, Calla benefits from this circular reasoning. Her avoidance of all things motherly allows her to have a sexual life; her sexual life keeps her from having to be motherly. Of course, she is constantly criticized as a bad mother and as a bad woman, but Calla is not one to care much about what people think; to her, what she is able to do is all that matters.

CHAPTER 3.

TRACKING A SHIFTING NARRATIVE VOICE

Calla's granddaughter, the only child of Calla's daughter, is the supposed major narrator of this story. Set in the framework of this girl's curiosity regarding her secluded grandmother, a woman about whom she hears rumors from the grandparents of the other children in the town, the story is told, years later, as the granddaughter reflects upon 1912. While there are sections in the text in which the narrator provides self-conscious commentary, calling attention to her perspective or her sources for information, these sections are rare. Most often, the story is told with details that only an omniscient narrator would know; in this context, the sudden and intermittent self-interrupting of the conscious voice of the granddaughter is disturbing.

Joyce Carol Oates, however, provides an explanation of sorts for the ability of the granddaughter to tell things that she should not know. Through the language the granddaughter uses, it is clear that part of her task as narrator is imagining. She is filling in the details and sometimes Calla's reasoning behind the actions, claiming, "*Yes it is unimaginable: that is why I must imagine it*" (11, emphasis original). When the narrator, not

having gone through pregnancy, describes Calla's pregnancies, she wonders, "*If this is a dream it is not my dream, for how should I know the language in which to dream it?*" (20, emphasis original). This is an echoing of an earlier claim made by the narrator that might explain her ability to authoritatively know and not just imagine what has not been told to her:

She was my mother's mother but not my grandmother in any terms I can comprehend and if her mad blood courses through me now I have no knowledge of it and am innocent of it. (5)

This passage plants the seed of the idea that perhaps the granddaughter can know, or at least effectively relate, Calla's history. While the granddaughter can imagine what she does not know, here it is suggested that she can know Calla through her blood relation to her. In another section of the text, the granddaughter, meeting an elderly Calla, notes, "there seemed for an instant to pass between us a small stab of recognition *Because we are linked by blood and blood is memory without language . . .* (85, emphasis original). In this, the claim is made that history and knowledge can be passed through generations of umbilical cords. While this view is somewhat mystical and perhaps unbelievable, since the granddaughter/narrator reports things she could not know through traditional channels (reading, rumor, stories), her almost omniscient

insights must be understood as a mix between the granddaughter's imagination and hereditary knowledge.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Oates often uses multiple voices in her texts. These multiple voices echo a tradition of a multiplicity of voices in a text which includes Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily" in which the pity and morals of an entire town are imparted in the telling of the story through a collective voice, as well as Wharton's *Ethan Frome* in which the narrator of the story, an outsider to the community in which Ethan and both his wife and Mattie live, is told through a collective town voice that, through gossip, informs the narrator of the history behind the story. While Faulkner writes his entire story from the viewpoint of a collective town whole, Wharton tells the story in the narrator's voice, and the town gossip, a smaller part of the narrative discourse, is marked with italics.

Oates walks a middle ground between these styles. Her narrator is both distant enough from Calla to be able to provide a sense of unbiased telling, yet she is closely enough related to Calla to be able to impart the contents of her inherited imagination. While it is fairly clear that what the granddaughter narrator is imparting is her interpretation of what she has heard and what she has imagined, her text also includes reported speech

and/or thoughts of mostly unnamed, but sometimes indicated, persons or groups. This text, sprinkled within the granddaughter's telling of the Calla's story, is always set in italic type, allowing this text to interrupt clearly the granddaughter's plain-type sentences. I will discuss this collective voice in more detail in a later chapter on race and racist views.

Oates' organization in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* helps make more believable this constant shift of voices. The novella is divided into three parts, with Part I comprised of twenty-three chapters within forty-nine pages of text. A similar fragmentation takes place within Part II, which divides twenty-four pages among twelve chapters. Part III ends the text with sixteen pages offered with no chapter interruptions. Averaging, then, two pages per chapter within the first two parts of the novella, Oates is able to offer a text that switches scenes and possible narrative voices often. This fragmentation of organization, including occasionally repeating information and telling information out of chronological order, allows for some play regarding the main narrative voice, which may or may not at times be the granddaughter, as well as some leeway in offering multiple sections of italicized opinions, morality, and revelations.

This fragmented order of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* is not accidental, nor is it forced. As Oates points out in an interview in *Piece of*

Work: Five Writers Discuss Their Revisions, her writing process mirrors this fragmentary, sometimes disordered result: "No, I never write a complete draft straight through. The voice of the narrative is always changing" (167). Writing in fragments allows her to shift the narrative voice within her text. A shifting narrative voice, too, allows for and even creates fragmentary fiction. Oates' writing process both creates and allows for the multiple voices she allows within *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*.

Calla's Imaginative Voice

Within the novella, Calla does not act as a narrator. However, in her life she creates much of what circles around her, and in this novella, as in her life, she does have some power. Calla asserts her voice in the naming processes that take place throughout the text. Calla was baptized "Edith Margaret," though she always refers to herself as "Calla," the name her mother, who died shortly after giving birth, left her, suggesting "the sweet waxy glaze of calla lilies, massed funeral flowers" as a "legacy suggestive of the grave" (5). Calla insists on going by her mother's name for her, and as a child even refers to herself in the third person "though no one knew who'd told her about that name, given to her by her mother on her mother's deathbed" (6).

Calla's insistence on going by "Calla" and not "Edith" became selective as she grew older. When she is married, Calla never tells her husband or his family that she is not "Edith," as they all know her (34). Even after she is married, Calla refers to herself as "Calla Honeystone," keeping her maiden name (23). Further, despite numerous entreaties to call her mother-in-law "mother," Calla insists on calling her "Mrs. Freilicht," "as if thrusting away her own rightful name onto another" (14). On the flip side of this naming, Calla insists on being only "Calla" in the eyes of her lover Tyrell Thompson. When he calls her "ma'am" or "Mrs. Freilicht," she passionately corrects him "as if they'd been quarreling" (43).¹⁵

Another way Calla asserts her voice is in the italicized passages of text which can be assumed to be her thoughts and/or speech. Although more often than not Calla speaks through her actions, these sections suggesting the violations of motherhood as well as her shifting and selective definitions of religion are vital to understanding Calla.

Calla's shifting definition of religion, as well as her shifting acceptance of it, culminate in her Bible reading later in life. After Calla dies, her family members take comfort in knowing that an old Bible, worn and dog-eared, has been Calla's only source of reading material in the room in which she locks herself. Calla's family hopes only that she managed to

find religious redemption. They do not know what the text says in Calla's voice that discloses her very serious conflicts between a religion that would paint her as evil for doing just what, in her view, her name fated her to do. Calla renounces the religion in the text that mirrors the patriarchy in which she lives. It would make sense, then, that her reading of the Bible, as her constructions and reconstructions of religion to fit herself, would be selective and revisionary. As a woman who is both disenfranchised by the religion she is fed and driven by her beliefs, Calla, like Emily Dickinson in poems such as her "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church," would likely discard parts of the Bible and parts of organized religion and rewrite other parts of both to suit her:

Some keep the Sabbath going to

Church--

I keep it, staying at Home--

With a Bobolink for a Chorister--

And an Orchard, for a Dome--

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice--

I just wear my Wings--

And instead of tolling the Bell, for

Church,

Our little Sexton--sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman--

And the sermon is never long,

So instead of getting to Heaven, at

last--

I'm going, all along. (1004-1005)

With the textual evidence regarding Calla's views on religion, it is apparent that her developed religion is not practiced in formal church services. She has rejected formal religion altogether, but has not rejected reading the Bible, and her family is relieved to discover a dog-eared Bible in Calla's room. Her reading, then, may have been "inspired both by a radical critique of its patriarchal ideology and by her hope to 'wrest a blessing' from it--nevertheless" (Ostriker 15).

CHAPTER 4.

OBSERVING RACE

An important addition in the revisioning of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* for Joyce Carol Oates' *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* is that of race and ethnicity. While Ethan Frome, his wife, and Mattie are all in the same socio-economic situation as Calla, Freilicht, and, to an extent, Tyrell Thompson, it is important that the characters in Wharton's work, unlike in Oates' novella, share a common ethnic background. Ethan and his wife are not marked as having any particular ethnicity, and they are both from established families. Thus, they are assumed to be of British descent. As Mattie is a blood relative of Ethan's wife, albeit a poor one, she cannot help but share in the same ethnic background as Ethan and her relative.

Oates offers a more complicated view. Calla Honeystone is from an established English-descended family that, through years of death, poor crops, and alcoholism, loses its established status. Calla's father leaves her poor and homeless. The relatives she joins then are also poor and are thus determined to marry her off. Calla's loss of wealth even before her marriage mirrors the financial deterioration of the Frome family following Ethan and Mattie's crash into the tree. Calla's position as the relative who

needs to be taken care of, and then needs to be married off, echoes the position of Mattie, who, although working as a helper to Ethan's sickly wife, is living with the Fromes because she has nowhere else to live.

However, within her marriage, Calla mirrors Ethan Frome himself. Tyrell Thompson, the water diviner who lends his services to the Freilicht family under Calla's direction, echoes Mattie's role. Both offer practical services, and for both their proximity to their would-be lovers is earned through this performance of services. Freilicht, then, is left to echo Ethan's wife. He is not alone in this, however. As much his voice as he is, Freilicht's mother joins him in an amalgamation of the role. She adds the level of criticism of Calla (the Ethan echo) needed to fit the role of Ethan's complaining wife.

Even with all of this mirroring, there is plenty of difference. First, and most obvious, is the switching of gender roles. There are two men, Freilicht and Thompson, and one woman, Calla, who is obligated by society to one yet drawn passionately to the other. Also quite obvious is the race of Thompson, an African-American male in the mostly Caucasian rural upstate New York of 1912. Race in this sense is expressed in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* both directly and indirectly through statements and actions of the characters. These statements and actions show almost

everyone, including Calla to an extent, exhibiting a variety of levels of racist views.

Freilicht and his family offer some clear-cut examples of racism in their expressed attitudes. When Thompson first arrives to look for water on the Freilicht property, Calla's mother-in-law's opinion of African-Americans becomes obvious through her reported speech:

You can't trust colored ever--except maybe if you know them by first and last names both and who their families are and who they work for and where they live and even then you can't trust them behind your back, you'd be a God-forsaken fool if you did and now there was her George's wife cavorting and prancing out there for anyone to see in the company of-- "How can she! Like a common slut! Our Edith!" (45, emphasis original)

Later, in what is a continuance of this stream of thought, Mrs. Freilicht ventures to say the word she stopped herself from uttering earlier--"nigger"--in a passage of her reported thought that, with its repetitiveness, manages to delve deeper into her prejudice:

How dare she: like common white trash: like a slut: and that nigger black as sin like he'd climbed up out of the ground exactly the kind to slice your throat without asking any questions, yes and then he'd wipe

the knife on your clothes when he was finished (47-48, emphasis original)

Similarly, Freilicht himself, having learned of Thompson's trip to the farm responds with rising voice to Calla's questions regarding how to compensate Thompson for his water-finding services: "*You* might owe him, *I* don't: if that nigger sets foot on my property again I'll shoot him down like a dog" (51, emphasis original). Whether or not Freilicht realizes it at this point, the "property" to which he refers could be his wife as easily as it could be his land.

Much of the overall societal attitude of racism in the text comes out in the rumors that circulate regarding Calla and Tyrell. While throughout the text there are non-attributed sections of italicized text which represent the opinions of the townspeople in general, one section of the text in particular highlights the rumors and opinions that circulate:

Those months through the width of the Chautauqua Valley three hundred miles from east to west and up into the mountains and downstate as far as the Pennsylvania border people told of Calla and Tyrell Thompson without knowing their names: a wild red-haired white woman who had abandoned her children to run off with a black man, in some

versions of the tale it was fructified like vegetation in steamy heat the white woman's husband and his kin were tracking them down meaning to kill them, in some versions of the tale the black man was an ex-convict from the South pretending to be a Christian minister carrying a Bible in one hand and a dowsing rod in the other--a dowsing rod that never failed to find water no matter how rocky or clayey the soil--and, strapped to one of his calves hidden up inside a trouser leg, an eight-inch deadly-sharp knife with which he'd slit the throats of many a white man between Georgia and here. (61-62)

This section continues with untrue gossip suggestions that Tyrell killed Freilicht, that Freilicht killed both Calla and Tyrell, and that Calla bore a baby by Tyrell that was either given to a Negro orphanage, delivered to Tyrell at his home in "some slum tenement or dirt-floor shanty with his own wife and barefoot children," or perhaps, "out of shame and meanness," drowned in the river or in the "*very well the black man had helped them dig*" (62, emphasis original).

Despite these rumors, and perhaps because of these rumors, Tyrell Thompson's real identity, his real background, is never really explored in the text. Tyrell's actions and words are all that can be taken to be true, and

even then there is the qualification that those words and actions are reported through a granddaughter who certainly has been influenced by the rumors that circulate regarding Calla and Tyrell. It is in this context that the seemingly unbiased descriptions of Thompson must be viewed. One such description of Thompson, given when Calla first meets him, suggests that Thompson may have escaped a lynching in the south:

Not knowing what to make of her [Calla] and fearful of her, Tyrell Thompson the itinerant water dowsers who was well over six feet in height and two hundred pounds in weight, by his estimate thirty years in age, and built strong and husky and unmarked by life as a young bull except for trifling scar tissue above his eyes and here and there on his body and a rope burn inflamed like a rash on his neck . . . and a filagree mark lengthwise on his broad back only a practiced eye would identify as a scar made by barbed wire. (43)

This description opens many doors of possibility. With a rope burn on his neck and a scar on his back from barbed wire, Thompson probably found himself fortunate enough to escape lynching. While rumors in the text suggest that Thompson, described in these rumors as "a water dowsers clad in black near seven feet all with a glass eye and a bad limp," came close to

being lynched because of his appetite for Caucasian women, it remains unclear whether Thompson was almost lynched for this reason or for some other reason (52).¹⁶

Calla, in her fascination with African-Americans, exhibits in parts of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* a sort of racialized view of blacks. After first seeing Thompson from a distance, Calla reflects on race: "Aloud Calla said, as if tasting the word, 'Ne-gro.' And black and rich and strange it tasted, like licorice" (38). When the Freilichts travel to town, Calla goes with them, slipping away to walk in the part of town populated by blacks:

She felt a thrill of horror, amid the blacks. That their immediate ancestors had been *owned*. Not these blacks as individuals for most of them were young, many were children, but their blackness, their essence--that had been *owned*. (40, emphasis original)

While Calla's fascination with African-Americans crosses a fine line that borders objectification, she does demonstrate her deeper understanding of race relations:

And now in this city amid the heterogeneous white population of the city they were so relatively few in number--like small dark carp in an immense school of fiercely golden

carp, depending upon God knows what precarious law or whim of nature to survive. *Like me they are outcasts in this country. No not like me: they are true outcasts.* (40, emphasis original)

Later, too, when her drunken husband levels a loaded shotgun at her, Calla backs away from him, and, either as a caution to herself or as a unvoiced warning to him, thinks, "*You don't want to hurt,--no you don't want to be hurt the way white people hurt black people*" (60, emphasis original).

Perhaps less obvious, but still permeating the text, is the ethnicity of the Freilicht family. Newer immigrants from Germany, the physical descriptions of both Freilicht and his mother are comical and border caricature. Freilicht is undersized, hairy, smelly, and sweaty. He is "an ugly little man--but ugly with character, distinction" (15). Calla's husband is also stingy with his words as well as with his money:

Even in a farming community of German immigrants and their descendants in which qualities of frugality were hardly uncommon George Freilicht was known as tightfisted and meanly scrupulous; it was said of him by his own relatives that the man possessed the pertinacity of a woodchuck, that most rapacious, cunning, and unkillable of wild creatures. (15-16)

Similarly, Freilicht's mother is described as a "dwarfish little barrel-shaped woman" who "had a flushed corroded face inside which a young girl's baffled and furious face was contained, and her eyes . . . were shrewd dantly blinking little pig's eyes" (21). Mrs. Freilicht, shown to be a dictatorial woman who is the harshest judge of Calla, at least up until Calla is injured going over the waterfall, is depicted earlier in the text as a woman dwelling in the kitchen, saying, in almost German immigrant stock-language, "Ja?--what is it?" (32). However, after Calla goes over the falls, Mrs. Freilicht develops a compassionate relationship with Calla, becoming "not only forgiving of the young woman but protective of her now she was broken and humbled" (92). It is only through this relationship that Mrs. Freilicht escapes the caricature her son cannot escape.

CHAPTER 5.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Once secondary teachers have convinced themselves and their schools' administrations and English departments that there is value in teaching Joyce Carol Oates' *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, and have somehow managed to secure funding for the needed textbooks, there will be some things teachers will need to tackle. First, educators will need to examine their educational concepts and the theories of education that dominate their school and departments. Teachers need to consider how they and others view politics as it relates to education. Depending upon views regarding the purpose of education, different teachers' ways of teaching *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* will vary.

Forecasting Problems

Even after teachers have convinced themselves and their districts/departments of the literary value of Oates' novella and have entered it into their canons of literary texts worth teaching, these teachers may still encounter resistance to teaching *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. This resistance might come in parents not wanting their sons and daughters to

read the book for a variety of reasons. First, these parents, and especially parents of the accelerated-level students who would be the most likely to read this text in a classroom, might feel that teaching a more traditional literary canon would better fit their sons' and daughters' educational needs. This argument is a basic one in the literary canon debate, and it is one that has some merit. Parents and students are often very conscious of whether or not they believe their education is preparing them for their futures, and, for people sharing a view centered on "Great Books," this means preparing college-prep track students for the Advanced Placement exam and/or for college literature courses for which parents assume students will need a certain shared literary background.

However, as the canon at the college level is opening to embrace contemporary literature much more rapidly than canons at the middle and secondary levels, teaching students only the "Great Books" is preparing them for assumptions about their prior knowledge that, for the most part, are either fading or no longer exist. If anything, college-level English courses are becoming more concerned with the ways in which students are taught to read. Thus, teaching students intertextual reading strategies is perhaps the best way to prepare students for course work in the university. Teaching *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* intertextually with works that are

already considered canonical, then, can help to prepare students for the reading processes they will most likely use in college literature courses.

Even if they agree with the rationale behind teaching contemporary texts within intertextual readings, some parents and students might also object to some terminology, scenes, and themes in the text. For example, the word "nigger" appears more than once in the text. Though the text as a whole calls racism into question and uses the term against itself and against those who use it, the mere use of the term is something that has sometimes, especially in the case of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, stalled the teaching of texts.¹⁷ Further, the sexual freedom and sexual enjoyment of Calla is something that expands many notions of the definition of women and mothers, as well as notions of sexual beings. While these explorations can lead to fruitful discussions and examinations of social constructions, these same examinations often create alarm among students and parents, especially when passages such as Calla's explicit bedroom struggles against her husband and her passionate lovemaking sessions with Tyrell Thompson are taken out of the context of these examinations.

It seems, then, that there are many pitfalls to avoid in teaching this text. In order to tackle these potential problems, teachers need to take preventative measures to end the chance of problems developing and

stopping the teaching of the novella. In light of the content concerns of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, teachers may examine the attitudes of their schools and communities and decide to forego teaching the text. However, if teachers decide to teach the text, even if they are granted the support of their department chair(s) and receive funding for ordering textbooks, they should also make certain that they are members of a professional teachers' organization that provides legal support for teachers in case there is terrific backlash against the teaching of this text. It may also be a good idea to send notes home with students informing parents of what their students will be studying.

Certainly, there will be some parents who will not want their children reading *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, and there will be students, too, who might be personally uncomfortable with the text. These students should be given alternative texts that explore some of the same issues of race, social class, and gender roles. The companion texts mentioned in the next section, especially those that the class as a whole would not have time to study, would work well in this capacity. This way, more general discussions of these themes will be open to all students in the classroom.

Placement of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* Within a Course

Oates' novella probably would work best in a classroom of advanced secondary-level students. Accelerated courses of eleventh and twelfth grade English/language arts would probably work best, although the maturity of the class, whether accelerated or general, and at whatever age level, will finally determine where this text will be taught.

I envision teaching *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* within a course that is arranged thematically around social problems and that has texts selected according to their ability to comment on one another. I see the texts "A Doll's House," a play by Norwegian Henrik Ibsen; "A Rose for Emily," a short story by American William Faulkner; *Ethan Frome*, a novel by American Edith Wharton; and "The Yellow Wallpaper," a short story by American Charlotte Perkins Gilman, working well in a course with *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. I also see study of Emily Dickinson's poems "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" and "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church," Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem (A Dream Deferred)," and Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" working well in an intertextual examination of Oates' novella. Other possible texts for an intertextual reading include William Carlos Williams' long poem *Paterson*, Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Theodore

Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*, and Wharton's *Summer* and *The Mother's Recompense*.¹⁸ Certainly, other texts can work as well in the course, and this study of texts could be a unit within a larger, more general survey course.

Specific Ideas for Teaching

A strong positioning of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* within its literary and historic framework is vital for the teaching of the novella. Using like-themed texts and examining the references and echoes of those texts in Oates' work can help expose the novella's literary framework. Preparing students to really understand the historical framework is as difficult as persuading them to understand the socio-economic, racial, and gender role definitions of 1912 New York state. Of course, prompting them to truly examine the same sorts of definitions in a contemporary setting can be the first step in leading students to examine the past.

Prompting students to examine the past can be worthwhile, though, and does not have to be horribly difficult. For example, the current popular film *Titanic* is set in 1912, the same year that Calla and Tyrell Thompson go over the waterfalls in a stolen rowboat. While the film largely highlights those who have financial success and Oates' work

highlights the other end of the socio-economic spectrum, it can still give a sense of the technological advances available at the time as well as somewhat of a sense of class distinctions. Taking a field trip to visit a museum or a "restored" area can also help students in their attempts to envision life in 1912, especially if classes can visit places that focus upon the correct time period of rural areas and people. Some schools will not be able to go on these trips; either it is too expensive, or there are no museums nearby that focuses upon that time period or a similar geographical and social region. In any of these cases, exploration can be done, by the students, by the teachers, or by both, through guided use of the Internet if it is available in the school. Perhaps teachers can even arrange to connect with different museums on-line.

One way to open up a classroom discussion of the deep relations of social class, gender, and race is to ask students to consider how they would "fix" the text in order to make the situations different for the characters, and in this case, especially for Calla and Tyrell Thompson. Students, in writing or in group and/or whole-class discussions, need to imagine what social situations, what codes of conduct, would change for the characters if they switched genders, traded races, or slid to different socio-economic classes. It sounds odd, but a great way to get into the text is to examine

how the text could be instead of how it is.¹⁹ This revisionary examination can help expose in the classroom the cultural codes operating within the novella as well as the cultural codes under which the students themselves are operating.

NOTES

1. While Ellen G. Friedman (*Joyce Carol Oates*, 1980), Mary Kathryn Grant (*The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates*, 1978), Marilyn C. Wesley (*Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction*, 1993), Eileen Teper Bender (*Joyce Carol Oates, Artist in Residence*, 1987), and Nancy Ann Watanabe (*Love Eclipsed: Joyce Carol Oates's Faustian Moral Vision*, 1998) all cover some of Oates' themes and most mention the other two texts in the trilogy (*Black Water*, 1992; *The Rise of Life on Earth*, 1991), not one of these scholars mentions *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* within these mentioned books. In *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (1996), Brenda Daly notes the existence of this trilogy, and mentions the strength of the mother-daughter bond within *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, as well as within all of Oates' works published in the 1990s, including *Because It Is Bitter*, and *Because It Is My Heart*.

2. *First Love* (1996), written by Joyce Carol Oates and illustrated by Barry Moser, features an adolescent protagonist named Josie who longs for her mother even as she not entirely voluntarily enters a strange, sadomasochistic relationship with her twenty-five year-old cousin. While Josie desperately wants to be loved, the person she wishes to love her is her mother, a woman who, having left Josie's father, spends the majority of her time socializing with a variety of men.

3. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, the created setting for his works, Oates' Eden County, as Johnson points out, is "a setting which mythologizes the rural area in upstate New York where Oates grew up" (Johnson, 15). For a similar discussion of Faulkner's county, see Joel Williamson's *William Faulkner and Southern History*.

4. While Arthur N. Applebee does not specifically mention Anglophiles within his examination of problem remaining in opening up secondary curricula, his 1974 book *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* does suggest that the notion of students gleaning great knowledge from a set of Great Books connected to a certain sense of literary heritage is one that is outdated, yet still prominent within secondary-level canon debates (247-248).

5. While a tradition of ignoring the contributions of female writers can be observed by the lack of female writers studied in secondary schools and even colleges, the tokenization of female writers and the discrediting of their work by marking the contributions of women as sentimentalism or regionalism is less obvious and would require some research or training in order to be able to train students to identify such practices of marginalization. For a discussion regarding the secondary-level marginalization of literature written by women, as well as suggestions regarding how to work female authors into the secondary curriculum, see *Weaving in the Women: Transforming the High School English Curriculum* (1993) by Liz Whaley and Liz Dodge, two secondary English instructors.

6. While I will discuss some literary echoes Oates builds into *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*, it is important to note that Oates also builds these same sorts of subtle echoes into her other works as well. Also, some of her works, especially some of her short stories, such as "The Metamorphosis," "The Turn of the Screw," and "The Dead," all collected with Oates' 1972 *Marriages and Infidelities*, display obvious echoes in their mimicry of titles of established literary works.

7. While I am uncomfortable labeling Oates' work, with so many echoes of Faulkner in her writing, as strictly "feminine" literature and am also uncomfortable with the claim that more contemporary literatures cannot be taught using methods that were developed and practiced on earlier forms of literature, I do recognize that there are ways to read more contemporary works and works written in a female voice by female authors that have not been privileged or taught, either in practice or in methods courses for English teachers in training. In order to model a fuller reading of these texts, then, in the classroom, educators need to be versed in ways in which they can highlight the aesthetics and voices of these texts.

8. Here I am a bit harsh on Golding's work. I am not saying that there is nothing to be learned from *Lord of the Flies*; certainly, I learned much about symbolism and human nature (albeit the human nature of young males only) from my study of the text as a high school sophomore. While I recognize that there is some value in retaining a common core of texts--texts most students would have read--the limited common core currently advocated by schools most often allows us to share a common belief that the people who are not represented in the literature that we are reading (women, people of color) either have nothing important to say or lack the

literary ability to say what they should be saying. I also hope to point out that often in the public schools a text is taught either because that is the way it has always been or because that is the easiest way to go about teaching. I do not believe either of these reasons form a strong arguments for teaching or not teaching a work of fiction.

9. This assertion is based upon my observations as both a secondary student (1988-1992 in Lodi, Wisconsin) and as an observer and teacher at the middle and secondary levels (1992-1998). While I have observed some curricula that are more inclusive, I have most often experienced situations where courses focus almost exclusive upon dead white male authors, both American and European.

10. Educators have used a more traditional framework of literary studies to determine a definition of "good" literature; however, this definition and way of recognizing "good" literature have grown out of the pattern of the sorts of literature that has always been accepted. This circular logic says, then, that traditional literature is good and that good literature is traditional. Non-traditional literatures, when judged by the standards of "good" literature, do not always make the cut. What is needed is a new definition of what can be "good" literature. More importantly, a new definition of the traits that make what can be "good" literature will open up teaching styles and focuses to allow for students and teachers alike to recognize different aspects of non-traditional literatures. For more on this subject, see *Redefining American Literary History* edited by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. For an article specific to my argument here, see Paul Lauter's chapter titled "The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline" (9-34).

11. Since I am uncertain anyone can effectively draw hard and fast lines around what is "natural" and what is "unnatural," I leave "natural" in quotations to mark an uncertainty, a bias in definition on the part of those doing the defining. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, Oates plays with the definition of a "good" or "natural" mother in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*.

12. From the different descriptions of Calla's pregnancies, from feeling trapped and almost having her life squelched in the pregnancies and births of her husband's children to the intense feelings of passion she encounters while pregnant with Tyrell Thompson's child, the text offers the idea that Calla's opinion of mothering her child with Thompson may have differed

from her view of mothering her Freilicht children. Her opinion of mothering Thompson's child, like the child itself who dies in the row boat incident, is never fully realized.

13. In *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, Brenda Daly reports on the criticism of Oates' productivity (x), and notes that critics have charged "that she writes too hastily, that she does not edit carefully" (229). Daly also cites Woodruff's text as evidence that Oates does indeed take an arduous path in her writing and revision processes. In *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*, Greg Johnson chronicles some of the critiques of Oates' processes, describing how in the 1970's and into the 1980's critics (mostly male) charged Oates with flooding the market with sub-par material and with recycling this material. Johnson offers his own defenses against these and other allegations; he also offers the defenses of other writers and of Oates herself (20-25).

14. I owe thanks to Brenda Daly for her insights, both verbal and included within her unpublished paper "Where Are Readers Going, Where Have They Been?: Joyce Carol Oates Anticipates Reader Resistance in the Trilogy of the Early 1990s," regarding the triple-telling of the suicide scene in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. The ideas I present, including the notion of romantic conventions in Western literature, are hers.

15. In a related practice, Calla's husband, George Freilicht, is referred to as "Freilicht" throughout the text, and is only referred to as "George" by his own blood relatives. This naming device distances him from Calla and from the readers at once. In doing so, the lack of feeling in their marriage is easier to understand, and the vilification of Freilicht, which is sometimes ethnically-based, is easier to swallow.

16. In *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* Sandra Gunning examines the trope of the black male rapist in American literature. While her examination obviously does not include Oates' contemporary work, she does focus upon Kate Chopin's short works which were written in around the same historical time as the setting of *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*. Gunning's book also examines more recent media images of African-American men, including Rodney King, Clarence Thomas, and O. J. Simpson.

17. While arguments for more subtle and damaging forms of racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have definite merit and need addressing, too often parent and student reaction to racism surfaces more superficially in the form of singular words like "nigger." Arguments against teaching a work of literature based solely upon a single word included within the text are so powerful because the word is more often than not taken out of both the context of the text itself and the context of the way in which the text, including a particular word, would be studied within a classroom.

18. I thank my thesis committee members, Brenda O. Daly, Mary Helen Dunlop, and Theresa McCormick, for suggesting this last grouping of additional texts as possible sources of intertextual study for *I Lock My Door Upon Myself*.

19. My processes in forming activities for education often grow out of my collected knowledge of education built up over years of education courses, pedagogical theory, and experiences as both a student and as a teacher. It is difficult, then, to place most of my ideas regarding education. This suggestion, however, is one I can place. The framework for this activity came from an Iowa State University course studying Multicultural literature. The professor of that course, Neil Nakadate, introduced me to the framework for this activity while studying Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

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