

“PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN ‘THE GIRL WITH THE BLACKENED EYE’ BY JOYCE CAROL OATES”

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Abstract: This article conducts a literary-psychological analysis of Joyce Carol Oates's short story 'The Girl with the Blackened Eye'. Employing a qualitative methodology rooted in psychoanalytic and trauma theory, the study investigates the profound psychological conflict experienced by the unnamed female protagonist following her abduction and sexual assault. The conflict is framed as a struggle between the conscious imperative for survival and normative social performance, and the unconscious, traumatic memory that threatens to dismantle the self. The analysis reveals how this internal schism manifests through narrative fragmentation, somatic symptoms, and linguistic dissociation. The protagonist's use of the second-person narrative voice ('you') is identified as a critical linguistic mechanism for managing unbearable psychic pain, creating a defensive distance from the traumatic self. The findings contribute to understanding how literature formally embodies post-traumatic stress, illustrating the conflict not as a binary but as a destabilizing force that permanently alters identity and perception. The study positions Oates's work as a significant exploration of the silent, internal aftermath of violence against women.

Keywords: Inner Conflict, Psychological Conflict, Trauma Identity crisis Violence and abuse Gender dynamics Power and control Fear and anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Joyce Carol Oates, a prolific figure in American literature, has long been distinguished by her unflinching exploration of violence, trauma, and the fragility of the American psyche. Her narratives often dwell in the liminal spaces where social order breaks down, exposing the raw, psychological wounds inflicted upon individuals, particularly women and girls. The short story 'The Girl with the Blackened Eye,' from the 1999 collection *Faithless: Tales of Transgression*, stands as a quintessential example of this focus. It presents a chilling account of a teenage girl's abduction, week-long captivity, and sexual assault, related years after the event. The story's power lies not in graphic depiction of violence, but in its meticulous portrayal of the enduring psychological conflict it engenders.

The central conflict in Oates's story transcends a simple victim-perpetrator dynamic, delving into the profound internal rift trauma creates within the survivor. The protagonist is presented as a seemingly adjusted adult, a wife and mother, yet her narration is permeated by the unresolved psychic material of her past. This article posits that the core of the story is the protagonist's ongoing psychological conflict: a struggle between the constructed self—the one who performs normalcy and has 'survived'—and the traumatized self that remains frozen in the time of the atrocity. This conflict destabilizes her identity, memory, and very mode of perception.

Literary scholarship has frequently engaged with Oates's thematic preoccupations, yet a focused analysis of the specific mechanisms of intrapsychic conflict in 'The Girl with the



Blackened Eye' remains underexplored. This study aims to fill that gap by applying a psychoanalytically informed framework to dissect the narrative's structure and language. Understanding this conflict is crucial, as it moves the discussion beyond the event of trauma itself to its permanent, transformative, and often invisible aftermath. It reveals how survival is not a return to a prior state but an endless negotiation with a fractured self.¹

Consequently, this article will systematically analyze the manifestations of this psychological conflict through the story's formal elements. It will examine the dissociation evident in the narrative voice, the somatic echoes of trauma in the body, and the linguistic strategies employed to contain the uncontrollable. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate how Oates uses literary form to clinically and poetically map the landscape of post-traumatic stress, making visible the silent war waged within the survivor long after external threats have ceased.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The analysis of psychological conflict in literature is deeply indebted to psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression, the unconscious, and the return of the repressed provide a foundational lexicon for understanding how traumatic experiences are managed—and mismanaged—by the psyche. Later developments, particularly in trauma theory, have refined this understanding. Cathy Caruth's seminal work defines trauma as an unassimilated event, a wound that is not fully experienced at the time it occurs but returns belatedly in intrusive fragments. This theoretical framework is essential for interpreting the protagonist's disjointed narrative and her symptomatic repetitions.

Furthermore, the study draws upon feminist psychoanalytic criticism, particularly the work of scholars like Laura S. Brown and Judith Herman, who contextualize trauma within patriarchal power structures. Herman's concept of 'complex PTSD' resulting from prolonged, inescapable abuse directly informs the analysis of the captive's experience. This theoretical confluence allows for an examination that is both psychologically nuanced and socially situated, recognizing the protagonist's conflict as stemming from a specifically gendered violation.²

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, close-reading approach grounded in literary criticism and psychoanalytic hermeneutics. The primary text, 'The Girl with the Blackened Eye,' is treated as a case study in narrative psychology. The method involves a systematic examination of narrative point of view, diction, syntax, imagery, and symbolic structure. Special attention is paid to linguistic anomalies—shifts in pronoun usage, narrative gaps, and repetitive motifs—as symptoms of underlying psychological conflict. The analysis is text-centric, deriving its claims from rigorous engagement with Oates's prose.

To structure the inquiry, the research is guided by two central questions: 1) How is the psychological conflict between the surviving self and the traumatized self formally manifested in the narrative's structure and style? 2) What specific linguistic and rhetorical devices does Oates employ to simulate the dissociative processes of a traumatized consciousness? By answering these questions, the study aims to contribute a detailed formalist-psychological reading to the existing body of Oates scholarship and trauma literature.

1 Oates, Joyce Carol. **Faithless: Tales of Transgression**. HarperCollins, 1999.

2 Caruth, Cathy. **Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History**. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.



RESULTS

The close textual analysis reveals that the psychological conflict is manifested through three primary, interconnected channels: narrative voice and perspective, somatic symbolism, and linguistic fragmentation. The most striking formal feature is the protagonist's consistent use of the second-person pronoun 'you' to refer to herself. This is not a generalized 'you' but a specific self-address, creating a profound split between the narrating 'I' and the experienced 'you.' For instance, she states, 'You learn to go away inside your head,' directly illustrating a dissociative coping mechanism. This grammatical choice enacts the conflict by creating a defensive distance from the traumatic memory, objectifying the victim-self as a separate entity.³

Manifestations of Psychological Conflict in Narrative Elements

Narrative Element	Formal Feature	Psychological Function
Pronoun Usage	Persistent use of second-person 'you'	Dissociation; splitting of the self into observing and experiencing entities
Temporal Structure	Non-linear, fragmented chronology; flashbacks	Simulation of traumatic memory's intrusive, belated return
Somatic Imagery	Focus on the blackened eye, bodily dirt, hunger, cold	Anchor of trauma in the physical body; symbol of violated identity
Linguistic Register	Fluctuation between clinical detachment and visceral intensity	Conflict between emotional numbing and eruptive pain

Secondly, the conflict is somaticized, anchored in the body. The titular 'blackened eye' is the central symbol, representing both the visible mark of violation and the internal shattering of self-perception. Her obsession with being dirty, her detailed recall of physical hunger and cold, all indicate a trauma that has not been processed cognitively but remains lodged sensorially. The body becomes the battleground where the conflict is felt, not just thought. The narrative oscillates between describing the body as a foreign, betrayed object and as the only certain site of experience.

Finally, the results show a pattern of linguistic fragmentation that mirrors psychic fragmentation. Sentences are often truncated, thoughts left incomplete, mimicking the mind's inability to formulate a coherent narrative of the event. Descriptions of the abduction and captivity are intercut with banal observations from her present life, demonstrating the intrusive nature of traumatic memory. This lack of integrative narrative is the linguistic correlate of her unresolved internal conflict; the story she tells cannot be smooth because the self it describes is not whole.

3 Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. 1920. Standard Edition, Vol. XVIII, Hogarth Press, 1955.



DISCUSSION

The findings strongly support the initial thesis that Oates's story is a meticulous literary mapping of post-traumatic psychological conflict. The use of the second-person voice is not merely a stylistic quirk but a profound representation of what psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott might term a dissociation between the 'True Self' (the traumatized girl) and the 'False Self' (the performing adult). The narrator can only speak of the trauma by speaking to a detached version of herself, a finding that aligns with clinical observations of trauma survivors who often describe feeling detached from their own experiences.⁴

The somatic focus of the narrative further deepens this analysis. By centering the conflict on bodily sensations—the eye, the dirt, the hunger—Oates underscores the pre-verbal, sensory nature of traumatic memory. This aligns with Bessel van der Kolk's neurobiological research on trauma, which posits that traumatic memories are often stored not as narratives but as sensory fragments and bodily states. The protagonist's conflict is, therefore, also between the verbal, social self and the non-verbal, somatic memory that defies language. Her struggle to narrate is a struggle to integrate these disparate levels of experience.

The observed linguistic fragmentation offers a crucial insight into the limits of testimony. The gaps and fractures in the narrative are not failures of craft but its very essence. They perform the impossibility of rendering a coherent, linear story from an experience that shattered coherence. This formal choice places Oates's work in dialogue with theorists like Shoshana Felman, who argue that trauma necessitates new forms of telling. The story thus becomes a meta-commentary on the conflict between the need to testify and the structural inability of language to fully contain traumatic experience.

Ultimately, the discussion affirms that the conflict in 'The Girl with the Blackened Eye' is unresolvable. The story rejects a redemptive arc. The protagonist's final act of looking at her own reflection and seeing 'the girl with the blackened eye' confirms the permanent inscription of the trauma into her identity. The conflict has not been synthesized but has become the defining condition of her selfhood. This bleak resolution is a powerful literary argument against simplistic notions of recovery, emphasizing instead the enduring, transformative, and conflict-ridden nature of survival.⁵

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that Joyce Carol Oates's 'The Girl with the Blackened Eye' serves as a profound literary case study of intrapsychic conflict in the aftermath of severe trauma. Through its innovative use of the second-person narrative voice, its focus on somatic symbolism, and its deliberately fragmented linguistic structure, the story formally embodies the protagonist's struggle between a present-day performing self and a past, traumatized self. The conflict is shown to be non-dialectical; it does not lead to synthesis or healing but to a permanent, uneasy coexistence of identities.

The study contributes to literary scholarship by providing a detailed psycho-stylistic analysis of a key Oates text, linking its formal innovations directly to contemporary trauma

4 Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. BasicBooks, 1992.

5 Winnicott, D.W. 'Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self.' *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, Hogarth Press, 1965, pp. 140-152.



theory. It underscores literature's unique capacity to simulate and articulate psychological states that resist clinical description. The protagonist's enduring conflict, as rendered by Oates, stands as a powerful testament to the silent, internal aftermath of violence, challenging readers to witness the complex reality of survival beyond the mere fact of being alive.

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