

1988

Tyranny and Anguish: The Two Sides of Fatherhood in the Father-Daughter Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oats

Philip Jo Egan
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Egan, Philip Jo (1988) "Tyranny and Anguish: The Two Sides of Fatherhood in the Father-Daughter Short Stories of Joyce Carol Oats," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 6 , Article 27.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol6/iss1/27

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**TYRANNY AND ANGUISH: THE TWO SIDES OF
FATHERHOOD IN THE FATHER-DAUGHTER SHORT
STORIES OF JOYCE CAROL OATES**

Philip J. Egan

Western Michigan University

Several critics have suggested that, notwithstanding her fame as a novelist, Joyce Carol Oates does much of her best work in short stories.¹ And in that genre, as in her novels, one of her most powerful themes is that of highly charged parent-child relationships, often so burdened with guilt or suppressed defiance that they erupt into violence. While parent-child relationships are common copy for fiction, Oates does have an unusual predilection for the father-daughter theme. Critic Anne Mickelson claims that Oates "is one of the first American authors to write of women arrested in what psycho-analytic theory calls the pre-genital state" because of father fixation.² Claiming that the "odor of incest hangs over Oates's work," Mickelson judges that, in her preoccupation with this theme, Oates "has enslaved her imagination to her personal devils" (29, 32).

Mickelson's harsh judgment may be debatable, but Oates's preoccupation is not. Oates has written at least ten short stories focused squarely on the father-daughter theme.³ I propose to study this group of stories for several reasons. First, the study attempts to define the recurring patterns in the father-daughter relationship, and to show how Oates manipulates these patterns artistically within particular stories. Critics have long noticed the presence of the tyrannical or domineering father in Oates's novels; when they consider this conflict in short stories, however, they often do so in brief statements which can have a dismissive quality: once the oedipal struggle is mentioned, there seems little else to say.⁴ The story is reduced to the cliché of psychological archetype while its artistic qualities—its technique, subtlety, and use of literary tradition—go unnoticed. The first part of this article, then, deals with the "dominant-father" stories, seeking both to point out the oedipal struggle in several and to analyze in detail the art of one example ("Demons").

Another problem with the attention to the domineering parent in the father-daughter stories is that not all the fathers are domineering. In fact, another figure frequently occurs, whom I call the "suffering father." This figure typically must endure the irrational behavior of a mentally disturbed daughter who may test everything from his patience and love to his finances. While critics sometimes mention these stories, they

256 FATHERHOOD IN JOYCE CAROL OATES

have yet to notice this character type. The second part of the article, therefore, treats the "suffering-father" stories, giving detailed attention to "Stray Children." These two groups of stories represent two sides of the same issue: the daughter's passage to independence, which, in Oates's work, is rarely smooth. In the "dominant-father" stories the father in some way blocks the passage; in the "suffering-father" group, the daughter is mentally incapable of making the passage.

The final goal of this article is simply to widen the discussion of Oates's stories. Both pieces singled out for analysis have been relatively unnoticed up to now. Moreover, anyone familiar with Oates criticism recognizes that currently a few stories capture disproportionate attention. (For example, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" has provoked at least ten studies in books and articles and has recently given rise to a movie entitled *Smooth Talk*.) By identifying father-daughter patterns informing a substantial number of stories, and by analyzing two little-noticed pieces in detail, the article attempts to suggest the range, consistency, and depth of Oates's short-story art.

I

In all of the "dominant-father" stories Oates employs the daughter's perspective. The relationship with the father is often subtly oedipal and fraught with emotions which inhibit or even preclude the daughter's relationships with other men. As a result, each of these stories raises the question of the daughter's liberation in some form—either from the father himself or from some restrictive circumstance he brings into focus.

In most of these stories, the father's death or the fact of his aging helps to precipitate the crisis in his daughter's life which offers her liberation. In "Assault" and "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body," the daughter returns to the run-down house of a dead or dying father, in each case after an absence of fifteen years. Both of these protagonists have difficulty with passionate experience. Charlotte (in "Assault") must come to terms with the memory of her violent rape; and Nina (in "The Heavy Sorrow") must deal with "the violence of her love for men and the violence of her fear of them" (*The Wheel of Love* 333). The very fact that both of these thirty-year-old women experience a crisis at the death of a father whom they have not seen in years suggests the power of the oedipal pull. The father's death undermines a subtle support, or removes a deeply-held assumption, and so forces a revision of their lives.

Both women have mystical experiences in connection with their fathers' deaths: Charlotte stays up one spooky night in her father's lonely house and faces down the possibility of his return; Nina washes

her father's dying body and comes to a sense of her mortality. Each achieves "liberation" of sorts.⁵ But it is a gray version of liberation. At the end of these stories we do not know for sure that either Charlotte or Nina will fully reclaim passionate experience. Still, each is ready for a new life.

There is no liberation in "By the River," where the father manipulates the life of his daughter Helen at several turns and finally murders her for deviating from his plans. But even here, the daughter vaguely recognizes a crucial transition when she notices a few minutes before her death that her father has become old and is no longer the heroic man of her memories (*Marriages and Infidelities* 141). In part, Helen brings about her own destruction by her indolent refusal to outgrow her father and to take command of her own life.

In each of these stories the father is near the end of his life and the daughter near the end of her youth. She has reached the decision point: she must achieve independence or suffer living (or even literal) death. That is why violence and death so frequently haunt the "dominant-father" stories. In the balance await the joys and uncertainties of liberation or the appalling waste of an unlived life. The challenge of writing such stories is to use the oedipal archetype subtly so that it informs the story without reducing it to cliché. In both "Assault" and "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body" the father is dead and his influence diluted, so that the conflict is played out entirely in the daughter's mind. "By the River" appears at first glance to be a testimony to the father's oedipal rage, but, from his monologue near the end of the story, we discover that the real villain of the piece is not a tyrannical father so much as the tyrannical poverty that shapes his life. In each story Oates leavens the oedipal influence with other issues.

Of considerable interest, therefore, is Oates's handling of "Demons," a story about a woman who transfers her loyalty from her tyrannical father to her new-found lover after a violent confrontation. At first it appears to be a purely oedipal drama. Eileen, the protagonist, an unmarried woman in her late twenties, lives with her invalid mother, her moronic sister, an irascible dog, and her coldly domineering father. She meets her future lover when he accidentally kills the dog with his car; thereafter, he courts her in only two other meetings. After the second of these, he accompanies her home where he is attacked by her father, whom he kills with one punch. Before so much as summoning a doctor for the old man, he and Eileen make love on the drawing room sofa.

Eileen's father represents the worst of the patriarchal tradition. Because of him, the mother has relegated herself to an invalid's existence. His daughter Marcey, Eileen's older sister with the intelligence of a nine-year-old, apparently contents herself to be her

258 FATHERHOOD IN JOYCE CAROL OATES

parents' servant. Even the irascible dog, we are told, is an extension of its master, having the same gray, balding appearance.⁶ Beneath the docility of these subservient creatures, however, seethes both a hatred of the old man and a desire to escape from him. The dog constantly jerks at the leash, attempting to get away; and Marcey—in a burst of fury never specifically explained—suddenly goes after her father with a butcher knife and is subsequently committed to a mental hospital.

The story poses the question of whether Eileen herself will become one of her father's creatures. Here Oates goes beyond the simplicities of the oedipal archetype and examines Eileen's own ambivalence about her freedom. She despises her father's dog, but weeps when it is killed; she recognizes Marcey's subservient status, but envies it as well, and is at first gratified to fill the servant's role when Marcey is committed; she longs for her lover when in the house, but, once out with him, she repeatedly insists that their love is doomed, that her father will never allow it, and even that she loves her parents too much to leave them. For all of the drama of the confrontation between father and lover, the most serious obstacles to Eileen's success are those she meets and conquers within herself. In this internal debate her lover is just as important as he is when he meets the father. Oates makes the lover almost an *alter ego* who helps her discover her "masculine" side. When out walking with him, "She felt that she was half a man in this conversation, half the man she walked with and half herself" (243). Later, when she presents objections to continuing their relationship, she does so in the apparent hope that he will refute or ignore them. At the confrontation with her father, "She felt the strength of her body flow over into [the lover's], lose itself in his" (252). She thereby manages to resist her father's imperious commands.

The "psychology" of this story will not exactly please feminists because Eileen gains freedom from her father at the cost of dependence upon another man. Still, the lover is not a completely exterior force. She has a desire for freedom which he recognizes and to which he responds, which strengthens her desire, which further encourages him to act, etc. Her "rescue" is partly self determination; it grows out of the give and take of their relationship, sort as it is.

Eileen's grief at her father's death is about the same as it is at the dog's (a brief cry on either occasion). Oates treats this scene comically and includes the cinematic touch of the lover lighting a cigarette and saying, "He was a pretty old man, you know. He lived a good life" (253). Of course, an unspoken corollary of her father's dominance is Eileen's sexual avoidance of other men; it is therefore appropriate that, before her father's corpse is even cold, she confirms his overthrow by making love to his killer on the drawing room sofa, amid the odor of

"dust and caution" (254). This scene, shocking by any conventional standard, confers upon the drama the clarity of psychological archetype.

The obvious (if complex) Freudian drama of "Demons" would still be rather trite except that Oates develops other layers of meaning within it. For example, the father's tyranny is not just Freudian; it is Orwellian as well. The story takes place in a decaying big-city neighborhood which the old man keeps under preternatural surveillance. We read in the opening paragraph that both the old man and his dog "heard everything, heard whispers not meant for their ears and words not spoken aloud, heard even the echoes of words that should have faded away" (232). This capacity amounts to something like thought control. Throughout the story the lovers must take into account the father's omniscience: he somehow knows every detail of fires and vandalism that happen in the neighborhood (242); Eileen assumes that he knows of her conversations with her lover though they occur well away from the house (244); she assumes that he always watches her from the window and that his spotlight, which illuminates the yard after dark, keeps the lover at bay (248). The sterility of Eileen's life extends to the neighborhood as well because her father uses all legal means to keep out renters who might bring children (234-235). When the lover offers to call the police after hitting the dog, Eileen replies that her father "doesn't approve of police in this neighborhood. . . . Except the private police. I don't know where they are. They're somewhere. . . ." (236). Eavesdropping, spotlights, "private" police—all these belong to a neighborhood version of Big Brother.

In this world the lovers are rebels. The man, a renter, first meets Eileen in the presence of a scrawled obscenity (an "underground" celebration of sex). Later they meet like fugitives on a rainy day in a park resembling a jungle and emerge "damp and criminal" (251). In about the middle of the story, there is a miniature trial in which the father interrogates Eileen about the dog, although by then he well knows what has happened. It is a Kafkaesque scene in every way. Not only does it feature the self-abasement of the child before the father, but, like trials in Kafka, it is a staged affair in which the prosecutor hurls unanswerable questions and the guilt of the accused is a forgone conclusion. The final confrontation between lover and father features a sartorial image of political and generational struggle in the 1960s: the young man in the beige pull-over, white pants, and canvas shoes clobbers the old man in the gray vested suit. When Eileen and her man make love at the end of the story, then, they are celebrating the fall not only of the domineering father but also of the more general idea of centralized authority.

There is still another strain of this story not completely explained by either the Freudian or Orwellian drama. As the title "Demons"

260 FATHERHOOD IN JOYCE CAROL OATES

suggests, the piece shares a good deal in common with myth or fairy tale. The father's powers of surveillance are not the product of technology but of his preternatural character. He is a "demon"—inexplicably and immutably evil—rather than a fictional character in the conventional sense. It is hard, for example, to imagine him having a real past or arriving at his current personality through any process of development. He just *is*. With such an evil character at its center, the story is rather like an Arthurian quest romance in which a chivalrous knight overcomes a series of obstacles, storms the castle, and releases the fair damsel from the power of his blackguardly counterpart. Here, of course, the lover kills a subsidiary demon (the dog), penetrates the surveillance, and fells his opponent in single combat.

There is yet another feature which gives the story a fairy-tale-like movement. "Demons" tells the tale of a woman who makes wishes that eventually come true, a fairly common motif in folklore.⁷ In this sense, Eileen controls the main events. She wishes for the death of the dog (233), and the dog dies; she says to her lover, "my sister Marcey should go away" (244)—and in the next scene Marcey goes berserk and is carried off to a mental hospital; toward the end she wishes that her lover would brave the terrors of her father's opposition, and he shortly does. With this record for her wishes, her final statement, ending the story—"Oh, let her die!"—bodes ill for her mother, at whom it is directed (255). The features of the quest romance and the wish motif give the plot of "Demons" the almost ritualistic character of a fairy tale.

One reviewer complains that "Demons" arrives at a "wholly unconvincing conclusion" because Eileen undergoes "an entirely arbitrary initiation into selfhood."⁸ But this is true only if we judge the story by strictly naturalistic standards. The greatness of "Demons" lies in the successful integration of its many narrative patterns. The Freudian drama and the fairy-tale patterns appeal powerfully to readers but in very different ways. In "Demons" Oates combines them. She then gives these archetypal patterns a modern cast with the contemporary setting and the concern with central authority. With so many disparate parts, one might fairly expect the story to have implausible passages and disorienting shifts, but this is not so. While the story has some unrealistic elements, once accepted in its own terms, it is quite plausible and smooth. Oates makes excellent use of different literary traditions to present a classic problem in modern form.

II

In the "dominant-father" stories, the perspective, as mentioned before, is always the daughter's; the father, or even men in general, may qualify as "the enemy" from whom the protagonist seeks liberation.

But Oates herself denies writing specifically "feminist literature" because she sympathizes equally with male and female characters.⁹ The "suffering-father" stories generously illustrate this sympathy. They adopt the father's perspective and dramatize the difficulties of fatherhood in the face of a mentally disturbed daughter whose condition offers little hope of improvement. Although the father has done nothing specific to induce his daughter's state (which can range from autism to drug addiction), he feels responsible for it and suffers bewilderment and anguish as a result.

While the "dominant-father" stories frequently invoke archetype and run the risk of cliché, the "suffering-father" stories slope toward pathos. The challenge of presenting these blighted father-daughter pairs is to show what is precious in their relationship without descending into sentimentality. Oates does this most successfully when she uses the story for a wider comment, as she does in "Stray Children," the best work in this group.

In this story Charles Benedict, a Detroit city planner in a "semipublic" position, has his conventional, bureaucratic life disrupted by the sudden appearance of his illegitimate daughter. Unknown to him until now, she is the result of his first sexual experience, some twenty-six years before. She suddenly accosts him on the street, claiming to know him; she later approaches his son, visits his house, and waits outside his office—all with the implied threat that she will blackmail him with their relationship. He does in fact give her large sums of money. By the end of the story, however, he feels a good deal of love for her as well, notwithstanding his horror both at what she is and at how she chooses to live.

Oates's characterization of the protagonist at the beginning accounts for much of the story's later power. Charles Benedict seems relatively happy, but is vaguely dissatisfied with his life. Originally, he and his wife seemed like an ordinary couple, but then "Charles discovered, around his thirty-fifth year, that he was not an ordinary man after all."¹⁰ He starts to rise in the ranks of the city bureaucracy; he moves several times to different offices (he now has an office at the edge of downtown in the city-county building); and he discovers that his circle of acquaintances—he no longer has any real friends—changes as his promotions demand. He loves his wife but feels that she is somehow "out of focus" for him, and he thinks of her as a big sister (283); he loves his four sons but has trouble believing that they are his sons (282). Apparently he feels quite distant from the more passionate times that produced them. As a city planner, he enjoys imagining the perfect city but realizes that the real city, present and future, bears little resemblance to his vision. The requirements of his work, then, have

262 FATHERHOOD IN JOYCE CAROL OATES

disengaged him from the palpable realities of family, friends, and environment.

His illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth June Smith, is his messenger from reality. Upon first meeting her on a crowded street, he puts her off in practiced bureaucratic fashion, retreating with a smile until he can slip into a crowd of passers-by. She does manage to talk to him in his office, however, and the scene reveals a tension between them built into their very speaking styles. Charles speaks in qualified, hesitant, often unfinished sentences. In the office scene, his daughter (speaking first) overwhelms him with her racier diction and powerful emphasis:

“Jesus, you must have money! What is your wife like, huh? Some lady from around here?”

“I . . . I don’t know what to . . .”

“Did you ever tell her about me?”

“I didn’t know about you. I still don’t . . . I’m still not . . .”

“My name is Elizabeth June Smith,” the girl said angrily, “and you better not forget it! And you better not hand me any crap! Don’t look at me like that, I can talk as loud as I want to! This goddam fancy office doesn’t cut any ice with *me*.” (287)

Apart from the girl’s contempt for both the style and amenities of his bureaucratic existence, her very tone confronts Charles with the vitality that has drained out of him in recent years. His daughter also challenges him in other ways. Although he gives her a great deal of money, she rather perversely chooses to live in a run-down section of town populated by young panhandlers and drug users operating outside the law. In going to visit her, Charles must pass through this district and see firsthand the ugly buildings and the apathetic people, the “stray children” that his city planning never will take into account. As he begins to see his daughter’s tragedy and the institutional failures that underlie it, his concept of paternal duty grows into love. For her part, the daughter turns out to have serious mental troubles. Her cowboy-like swagger in the first scene degenerates as she uses drugs and becomes ill until, in the final scene, her talk ricochets wildly between paranoia, contempt, and (when Charles gives her money) extravagant gratitude. The story ends as Charles is panhandled outside his daughter’s apartment, and, although he has refused an earlier panhandler, he gives this time “until he had nothing left to give” (301).

The story is rather Chekhovian in its effect and typical of the “suffering-father” stories. At the end plenty is left up in the air concerning both the destiny of the daughter and her relationship with her newly-found father, but the story isn’t designed to resolve these

matters. Rather, it demonstrates the effect upon Charles. He experiences in a personal way for the first time pity for those whom the family structure neglects and the city government ignores. He pities them, feels responsible for them, and knows he cannot help them. Even as he hands coins over to the panhandler, he realizes that the city's future "must obliterate theirs" (301). The story offers no solutions for either the personal or social problems it raises. It offers only the moral education of Charles Benedict.

The other "suffering-father" stories—"Wednesday's Child," "Daisy," and "Funland"—are equally without solution. In "Daisy," the father is a poet in Europe who cares for a brilliant but mentally ill daughter in a rather incestuous relationship. The story opens with the father singing his daughter a parody of the love song "A Bicycle Built for Two." He courts her like a lover; he gives her rings (normally a symbol of marital fidelity); he worries whenever she mentions her dead mother whom he considers something of a rival. Yet the unhealthiness of the relationship is redeemed by its tenderness and by the lack of any humane alternative. (Previous experience makes it clear that committing the daughter to an institution would be brutal.) At the story's climax, the father recognizes that the daughter, influenced by thoughts of her dead mother, narrowly avoids opting for suicide. The story ends later that day as they walk on the cliffs together overlooking the sea. The final image of the father and daughter at the edge of the precipice expresses the reality of all the "suffering-father" stories. The current crisis passes, but the larger problem remains and disaster is never far. The father can only muddle through and be as humane as possible amid the difficulty.

It is not hard to see why the two different kinds of father-daughter stories achieve different effects. In the "dominant-father" stories, the daughter is usually of age, and, for better or worse, capable of acting in her own behalf. The result is a roughly equal conflict. In the "suffering-father" stories, on the other hand, the daughter, if not actually a child, is in some ways childlike and dependent. As a result, these pieces aspire chiefly to a finely pitched pathos as the reader can only sympathize with the characters caught in the crushing weight of circumstance.

Joyce Carol Oates examines the father-daughter theme more than almost any other writer in American literature thus far. In doing so, perhaps she is exorcising her "personal devils," as Anne Mickelson charges; if so, it would not be the first time that good fiction has emerged from an author's obsessions. Whatever the truth of Mickelson's charge, we can be grateful for the quality and versatility that Oates adds to our literature's discussion of this theme.

264 FATHERHOOD IN JOYCE CAROL OATES

NOTES

¹See Hilda Gregory, "Eros and Agape," *PrS*, 46 (1972), 177-178; Walter Sullivan, "The Artificial Demon: Joyce Carol Oates and the Dimension of the Real," *HC*, 9 (Dec. 1972), pp. 1-12; and G. F. Waller, *Dreaming America: Obsession and Transcendence in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979), p. 3.

²*Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women* (Metuchen, 1979).

³These stories are: "Demons," "The Assailant," and "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body" from *The Wheel of Love* (New York, 1970); "By the River," "Stray Children," and "Wednesday's Child" from *Marriages and Infidelities* (New York, 1972); "Assault" from *The Goddess and Other Women* (New York, 1974); "Daisy" from *Night-Side* (New York, 1977); and "The Witness" and "Funland" from *Last Days* (New York, 1984). Other stories where the father-daughter theme is significant (though less emphasized) include: "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again" from *The Wheel of Love*; "Concerning the Case of Bobby T." from *The Goddess and Other Women*; and "Bloodstains" from *Night-Side*.

⁴See, for example, Joanne Creighton's brief characterization of "Demons" and "The Assailant" in *Joyce Carol Oates* (Boston, 1979), p. 115.

⁵For a "liberation" reading of "The Heavy Sorrow of the Body" see Joseph Petite, "'Out of the Machine': Joyce Carol Oates and the Liberation of Women," *KanQ*, 9 (1977), 75-79; for such a reading of "Assault" see Katherine Bastian, *Joyce Carol Oates's Short Stories: Between Tradition and Innovation* (Frankfurt, Germany, 1983), pp. 92-97.

⁶All references in the discussion of "Demons" are to *The Wheel of Love* (New York, 1970).

⁷See entries for "wish" and "wishes" in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington, 1955-58), 6: 873-874.

⁸Richard Gilman, *New York Review of Books*, 25 Oct. 1970, pp. 4, 62.

⁹See Leif Sjoberg, "An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates," *ConL*, 23 (1982), 267-284.

¹⁰All page references in the discussion of "Stray Children" are to *Marriages and Infidelities* (New York, 1972), and specifically here to p. 283.