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Serial Escapers: The Fate of the
Women Characters
in Joyce Carol Oates's
A Bloodsmoor Romance

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in English at Massey University.

by Mary-Helen Ward

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Abstract:

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Joyce Carol Oates uses a parody of nineteenth-century attitudes to women to expose the misogyny inherent in contemporary American family life and romantic love. The women characters in this novel all escape, with varying success, from the restricted roles allowed to them by their society, and acted out in the Kiddemaster/Zinn family. It is through these escapes that this study approaches Oates's exposure of misogyny.

Beginning with an overview of the ways that the women characters are objectified both as members of the family and as the objects of romantic love, and how this distorts and limits them, the discussion moves on to discuss the methods by which the characters perceive their condition. The avenues of escape that they attempt, often trying more than one method, are described, and the relative success of each escape is assessed. The metaphor of a secret passage that each woman character must discover, enter, negotiate and leave underlies this work.

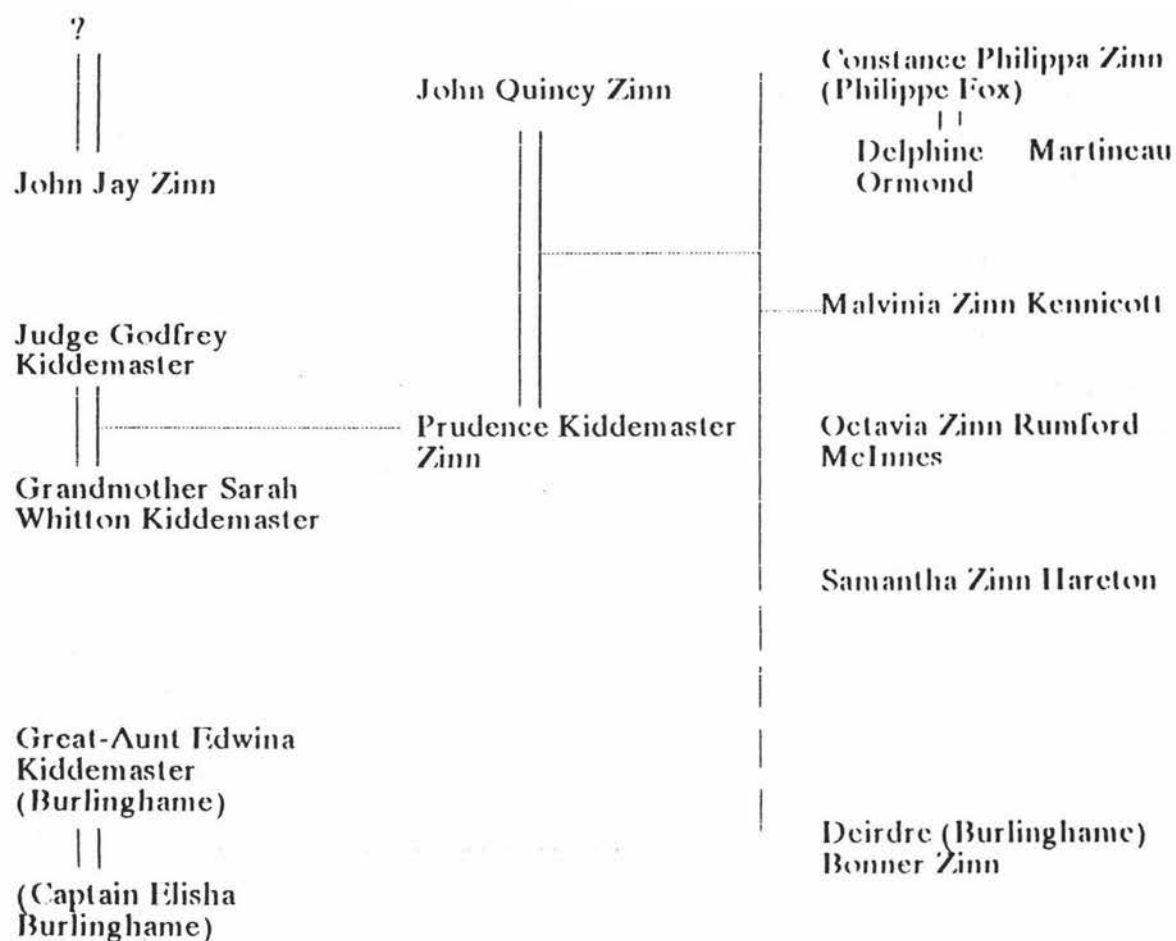


Figure 1: Family Relationships in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*

Preliminary remarks

In the course of preparing to write this study I have read a wide range of Oates criticism. Most of it was not useful to me, because it was either unconcerned with the implications of Oates's writing about women's lives, or it tended to come into the category of what Naomi Wolf calls "victim feminism" – the view that women (whether writers, readers or characters), are somehow purer and better than men, and deserve to be treated as such. The critics whom I found to engage seriously with Oates's writing as woman on women, although I did not always agree with them, were: Eileen Teper Bender, whose book *Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence* (1987) gave me many valuable ideas and insights; Linda Wagner, whose collection *Joyce Carol Oates* (1979) contained some useful articles; Joseph Petite, whose four articles on Oates as "liberationist" (1974–88) gave me something to argue against; Joanne Creighton's recent (1992) book *Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years*; and Elaine Showalter and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser for the connections between *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and *Little Women*. Oates herself, in her latest collection of criticism (*Woman*) *Writer* (1988), provides interesting commentaries on writing and on her own fiction which often proved a starting point for my own thinking.

For background on the nineteenth century, particularly in the field of women's health, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, by John and Robin Haller, was invaluable. The researches of Carol Smith-Rosenberg and of Lillian Faderman on relations between women in the nineteenth century were of interest also, although I find Faderman's view of the lack of a sexual dimension in these relationships to be rather naive.

More generally, despite the insights I gained from Irigary, Kristeva and others of the French psychoanalytic school, and my wide reading of (particularly American) feminist literary scholars such as Nancy Miller, it has been the recent "popular" books by Marilyn French (*The War Against Women*), Susan Faludi (*Backlash*) and Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth* and *Fire with Fire*) that have most shaped my thinking while being engaged on this work. Whether this is a reflection on the shallowness of my thinking or on the unexpectedly serious tastes of the book-buying public I cannot say.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge support from Professor Richard Corballis and Dr Karen Rhodes, Massey University English Department; Drs Pauline Simonsen and Jenny Curtis for many lively discussions on nineteenth-century mores, Ms Lisa Emerson for reading and enjoying *A Bloodsmoor Romance* with me, and Jane, for her unfailing sense of what is possible and for her love.

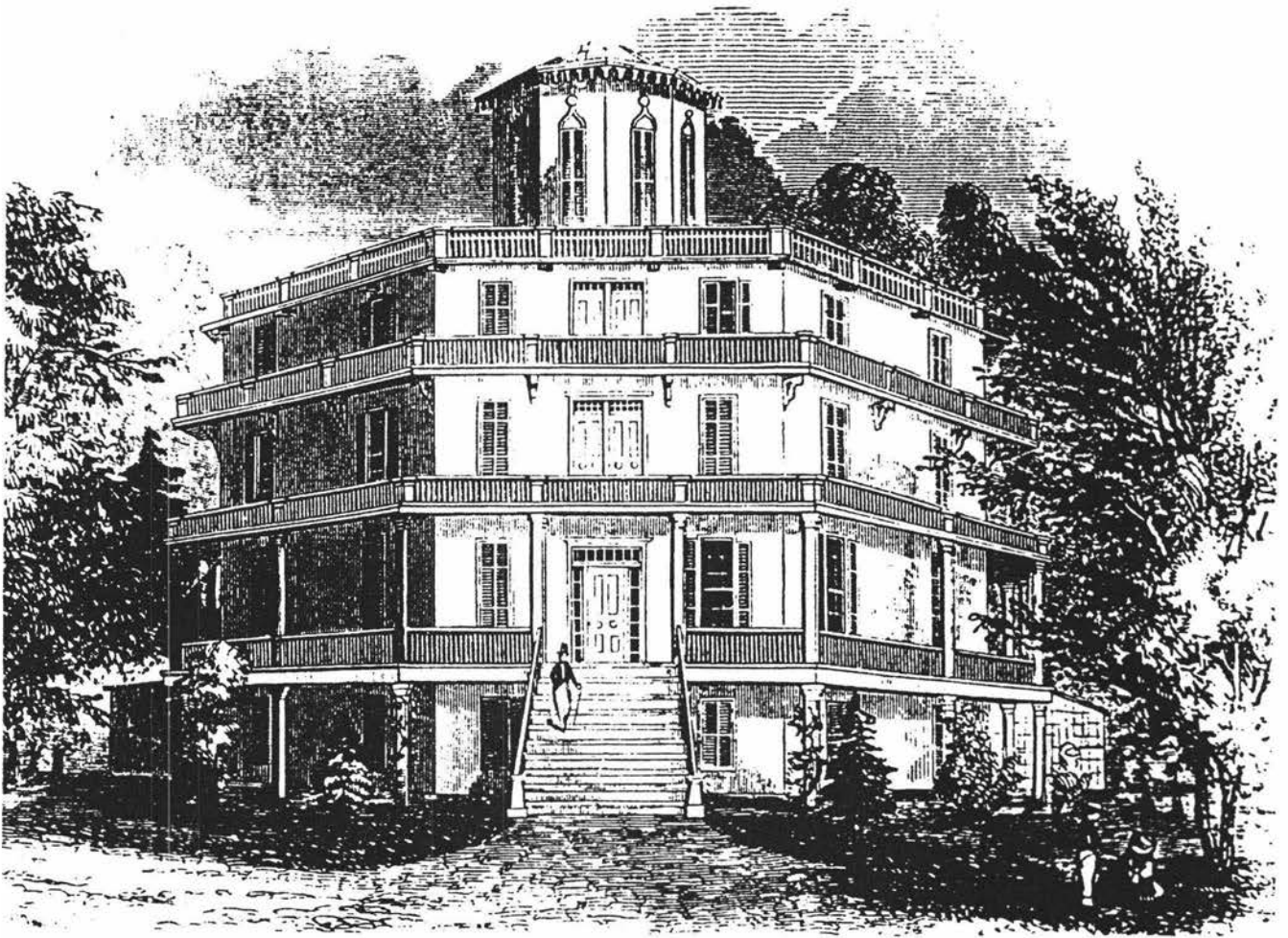


Figure Two: The Octagon House of Orson Squire Fowler, Fishkill, NY, 1845 (New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, NY) (Mc Lanathan 184). See *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, page 11.

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Chapter One:

An introduction to Oates, *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, and the key concepts of this study

Joyce Carol Oates is a prolific – some say too prolific – writer. Since 1963 she has published at least 20 novels, 16 collections of stories, 16 single stories or novellas, 15 books of poetry, 8 books of criticism and essays, and numerous articles, essays, reviews etc. She has won many literary awards, beginning with the National Book Award for *them* in 1970. She also co-edits, with her husband Raymond Smith, the *Ontario Review*, and presently holds the position of Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Lecturer in Creative Writing at Princeton. It is obvious that she is a major American woman writer, but the choice of Oates as a subject for feminist analysis needs more explanation.

In a workshop in 1977 called "The Need for Feminist Literary Theory" (cited in Miller 1991, 34), Elaine Showalter made the now famous distinction between feminist critique ("studies of literature that focus on the texts of male authors", the object being "to uncover and demythify the workings of... the phallogocentric discourse"), and feminist criticism, which seeks to "reclaim and recreate the specifically female inscriptions of culture". This study comes under the second heading. The few feminist critics who have previously attempted this task on Oates's work (an example being Constance

Denne in *The Nation* in 1974) first tended to put her in the 'mystical, transcendental, woman-is-closer-to-nature-and-therefore-spiritually-pure' category. Feminist critics have more recently tended to critique Oates, rather than criticise her, falling into the trap of considering her writing to be "like a man's" – a 'compliment' that Oates herself finds particularly irksome, and likes to meet with the deconstructive question "Which man?"¹

It is only grudgingly, since the publication of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, that Oates has been considered a feminist writer; she had previously even been slated by feminists for her depiction of women as dependent on men financially and emotionally, and her dedication of *Do With Me What You Will* (1974) to the then president of NOW was considered insulting. Some of her more recent novels are now being described as "overtly feminist" (Bruccoli & Baugham 385), but her acceptance is far from complete; for example, Bender cites Joanna Russ as vehemently criticising *Solstice* (the only novel of Oates's where female friendship is a major factor – albeit negative – in character construction) as "another sadistic Lesbian Novel" (197 n24).

Although the scope of this investigation is necessarily limited to one novel, how Oates's male characters see life and themselves has always been quite different from the world view of her female characters; Oates has always been well aware of the pressures that mould both men and women within patriarchy, and has reflected this even in her earliest fiction. The worlds inhabited by Jesse and his wife in *Wonderland* (1971), for example, are so separate as to appear almost different cultures, and the world that their daughter Shelly is growing up in seems to have much more in common with her mother's empty future than it does with Jesse's full, complete life of

¹ Reported in *(Woman)'Writer*, 28.

satisfying work coupled with public recognition. Again, in *Do With Me what You Will* and *Expensive People*, and in much of her short fiction (particularly in the collection *Marriages and Infidelities*), Oates bears out her statement that, while she may not believe in "a distinctly 'female' sensibility", she does believe in "a distinctly female fate."²

This often-quoted statement is problematic for a number of reasons. With it, Oates has, of course, managed to alienate many male critics, who objected to the implication that they do not receive the work of women writers fairly – Oates refers to these as "homosocial" critics, men who do not believe that women belong to the "'family' of man" (*Woman* Writer 31). However, she also undermined any position she might have hoped for in the feminist literary community in a 1980 article, with her denial of the existence of a "female voice", claiming that writers each write as individuals and that "the serious artistic voice" is "sexless". Oates herself says, in *The Profane Art*, she disallows much of what writers claim about themselves, using D H Lawrence's dictum to "trust the tale, not the teller". It is ironical that if we do this with her own work, it is clear that although the female fate is what has concerned her consistently throughout her career, in her work it is inextricably bound with the silencing of the female voice – that the female fate is to be silenced through negative and narrowing objectifications, and *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is no exception. In Teper Bender's words, "...despite her protests, it is not only the female fate but the implications for the woman writer that Oates explores in her own Victorian Romance" (131).

² From a review of *The Penguin Book of Woman Poets* in *The New Republic* in 1979, cited in Teper Bender 131.

Bender also claims that Oates exposes a "buried pattern of constriction" in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* as a "pervasive and oppressive social subtext" (132), and Creighton states that the women of the family are "literally and figuratively confined within the domestic sphere and within the restrictive and prescriptive roles dictated by the patriarchy" (1992 43). Most of the women characters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* are as confined by multiple objectifications as they are by their corsets, and many attempt escape from their allotted roles more than once in the course of the novel (although only one, Constance Philippa, actually throws away her corset!). Interestingly, the quietest and least disruptive escape is that of Prudence, who slips away to the cause of dress reform.

This model of women's lives as being those of serial escapers will be emphasised by the structure of this work, which considers first the nature of the objectifications that confine the female characters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*; secondly, the realisation by the characters of their confinement; and thirdly, their escapes and their final destinations. Thus, while no one character, or set of characters, will be discussed as a whole, virtually every female and most of the male characters will be mentioned at least once.

A Bloodsmoor Romance is the site where *Little Women* meets *A Blythedale Romance*. It is one of three novels that Oates has written in imitation/parody of an historical genre. The others are *Bellefleur*, the macabre story of the Bellefleur family over many generations up to the middle of this century, much of which, Oates states startlingly, is "a diary of my own life, and the lives of people I have known" (*Woman Writer* 371); and *The Mysteries of Winterthurn*, which she confesses is her "favourite

among [her] own novels" (*Woman Writer*) 375). This last is a turn-of-the-century detective novel (or series of linked novelettes) featuring the equally bizarre town of Winterthurn and the Kilgarvin family, and their dealings over a lifetime with their cousin Xavier Kilgarvin, the great detective.

In writing *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Oates has used the marriage manuals and the romantic fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century as inspiration. Her 1987 article "Pleasure, Duty, Redemption Then and Now: Susan Warner's *Diana*" gives some interesting insights into this process. She feels it is impossible for contemporary readers to read these "texts"³ as they were written – surely that is now taken for granted, post-Derrida. But she has a specific point to make: "Contemporary feminist criticism of nineteenth-century women's literature is handicapped, to a degree, by its secular and humanist perspective" (423). Irony, she feels, is the tool we use to overcome our discomfort at what seem unbearably naive statements of the human condition. And irony – frequently slipping into parody – is the very tool that Oates has used to perfection in the construction of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. Oates's creation of her central character, the Narrator, allows her to focus the sustained parody that marries our, and her, awareness of the gap between our perceptions and those of her characters. The Narrator is the mistress of double-speak, of the half-closed eye, and of the veiled innuendo. Through her, Oates can let us 'hear' the voice of the nineteenth century, while 'seeing' through the eyes of the twentieth.

³ Oates dislikes the distancing inherent in the current vogue for the use of the word "text" in literary circles, referring to it as "that most sinister of terms". She points out that what are referred to coldly as "texts" were often "written as urgent human documents".

The method that Oates has used in this novel is a brilliant post-modern strategy of weaving/piecing/knitting together history, marriage manuals, and romances, and embroidering the resulting fabric with her own fiction. The reader is often sent scurrying to a reference book to check if an event or person is 'real'; in any given list in this book, whether it be of poems or poets, books, politicians or hot-air balloonists, theatre performances or famous mediums, some of the items will be historically verifiable,⁴ and some will be fictitiously historical. Some will be even be historically fictitious, such as the subject of the seance at which Prudence and Octavia first see 'Deirdre of the Shadows'. This seance is being held by Aunt Geraldine Miller to make contact with her late niece Annie, called Daisy, who died in slightly mysterious circumstances in Italy; but this happened not in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, or even in an earlier Oates novel, but in Henry James's story "Daisy Miller". Mark Twain appears, as do Charles Guiteau and Helena Blavatsky; Margaret Fuller's poetry is quoted alongside that of the fictitious Parthenope Brownrrigg, and the song that haunts Edwina, "Adieu! 'Tis Love's Last Greeting", is attributed throughout the novel to Schubert by the Narrator. It is only after the death of Edwina that the Narrator feels free to admit that the song is in fact composed by "one *August Heinrich von Weyrauch*, of whom, I am afraid, very few of us have heard" (575). Not surprisingly, as he, and the song, appear never to have existed! With this construction, Oates is able to maximise the sense of play which postmodern fiction exploits.

Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, an Alcott scholar, compares Oates's nineteenth-

⁴ Even the Zinn family home, the Octagonal House, is based on the designs of Orson Squire Fowler, author of *A Home for All; or, the Gravel Wall and Octagon Mode of Building* (1848). Fowler's original sketch of the Octagon House is reproduced as the frontispiece to this study.

century voice in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* with Alcott's re-telling of her unhappy life (in *Little Women*) in a happy tone, and remarks that she sees Oates's retelling as being in agreement with Elizabeth Davis's statement: "*Little Women* is a fascinating case of one individual's life reshaped not just to the personal wish fulfilment that's probably part of any autobiographical novel, but also to the dictates of a cultural ideal" (212). She sees Oates as demonstrating how writing by women must always be shaped to the male cultural ideal, but can be subversive in the guise of reshaping for moral wholesomeness. So *A Bloodsmoor Romance*

becomes, finally, a celebration of the Victorian woman writer who, like Oates's Deirdre...and her genteel narrator [and Octavia], is able to achieve power and subvert the cultural ideal when seemingly most powerless and supportive of it. Thus what appears an outrageous parody of women's sentimental fiction actually supports the efforts of female scholars to exhume and examine it (212).

Oates's hidden hand in the text is occasionally allowed to show itself, perhaps most often when there is a major slippage between what the Narrator is saying and what we can imagine from the facts she has given us. One is the emergence of The Beast when Malvinia is in bed with Mark Twain, discussed in detail on p53 below; another is in the reunion between Deirdre's client, a 90-year-old Baroness, and her husband who has been dead for at least 60 years. This "poignant love-exchange betwixt the Baron and Baroness" is described by the Narrator as "tearful but nobly restrained" (479), and the event is made to appear romantic, rather than the farce we can imagine. Suddenly it descends into true farce with the intrusion of the spirit of Madame Blavatsky, "with what coarse effect, both buffoonish and painful, in the midst of the Baroness's drawing room, the sensitive reader can well imagine!" (479). In fact, to contemporary readers, the already laughable 'romantic' moment is improved considerably by the vital spirit of Helena, who is never anything if not honest in her emotions.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis, in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, points out that

In nineteenth-century fiction dealing with women, authors went to a great deal of trouble and even some awkwardness to see to it that *Bildung* and romance could not coexist and be integrated for the heroine at the resolution...This contradiction between love and quest in plots dealing with women as a narrated group, acutely visible in nineteenth-century fiction [such as *Diana* referred to above], has...one main mode of resolution: an ending in which one part of that contradiction, usually quest or *Bildung*, is set aside or repressed, whether by marriage or by death (3).

The chief difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's fiction, in DuPlessis's view, is that this tension is now openly dealt with; in modern fiction it is acknowledged that there is probably no resolution to these two forces in women's lives, and negotiation between romance and independence is a major part of the interest in contemporary novels.

Oates, then, is writing of (and, fictionally, in the persona of her Narrator, in) the nineteenth-century, when women's destiny was fictionally resolved by death to the self (marriage), by death of the spirit and will (insanity), or by the actual death of the body. But Oates, of course, is writing in (and, as we shall see, partly of) the late twentieth-century. She cannot escape her self any more than the young women of the Zinn family – and, in a less obvious way, their mothers and aunts – can escape their fate. Inevitably, each of them is drawn back to Bloodsmoor from the farthest reaches of the United States. Only Constance Philippa, a cross-dressing lesbian, eventually escapes the maelstrom of family and home, but that home has now become a women's environment; economic and social power is firmly in the hands of the Zinn sisters.

One of those who cannot escape the pull of Bloodsmoor, as she is firmly entangled in its meshes, is the Narrator. She is 'a spinster of uncertain age' who, in the style of the time, comments fully on events as she relates

them, while attempting to put the seal of respectability firmly on her tale. Oates's creation of the Narrator is a master stroke, allowing her constantly to undercut and point up both the hypocrisy of nineteenth-century mores and their survival into the late twentieth century. The Narrator is as much a character in her work as any of the people she is narrating, and, although she constantly re-asserts her disinterest and objectivity, Oates is well aware of the pitfalls of claims to objectivity.

Keyser sees *A Bloodsmoor Romance* as primarily a marriage between "material from Alcott's life and her fictionalisation of it in *Little Women*," joining "a long line of commentaries on the relationship between the two" (211). While this may be true, Oates's novel is much more than this, but it is interesting to learn that Alcott's classic tales of the March family, while loosely based on the Alcott family, are "idealised by the tenderness of real feeling", Alcott having "exorcised her miserable past by recording it with more gaiety and gusto than she can possibly have felt while living it" (211-2). In the same way, the Narrator attempts constantly to inject a note of respectability and Christian morality into her material, giving it an 'improving' tendency. This moralising, while it is a clear feature of nineteenth-century fiction, is not absent in our own time; it is just that the message has changed. We may no longer be interested in novels that exalt the role of wife and deny sexual passion; the current morality is that all are entitled to freedom of expression and choice, and that is what we expect to see in our fiction.

As a result of this shift to more openness of outcome, the tension between the sexes has become so explicit in contemporary fiction that it has been referred to as the war between the sexes – most recently, as the war

against women. If there is a war against women, as French and Faludi have claimed, the weapon used is objectification, the assigning of particular roles, and defining by those roles alone. Any characteristic that does not fit the assigned role can then either be ignored or, if that is not possible, be labelled as pathological – either bad or mad.

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, men's objectifications, their assigned roles, bring them power and approval, and are based not so much on what they are (man, father) as on what they do (lawyer, inventor). The appalling child Godfrey, who seems to present a sort of distilled essence of cruelty, is described by the Narrator as "*angel-child*" (514), "robust, tireless, bright-countenance'd, and gloriously high-spirited" (513). Men's occasional escape from an assigned role (such as Judge Kiddemaster's final dementia, or the cruel abuse that Edwina's late husband, a supposed English Gentleman, inflicted on her) is likely to be considered a "manly" attribute, whereas women who are seen to step outside their societal roles are considered to be 'unfeminine', or even 'unnatural'. Constance Philippa will, in time, be easily disposed of by society's use of this label, while Edwina will sacrifice her daughter and her own maternal desires to keep her 'good name' and the benefits of being a 'normal' (albeit unmarried and therefore chronically 'unfulfilled') woman.

What it meant to be a normal woman in the nineteenth century is nicely summed up by Freud in his *Lecture on Femininity* (Ed. Strachey 1964). Freud expected to observe women as masochistic (149), narcissistic (166), giving 'preference to passive aims' (149), and having "little sense of justice" (168). She would choose a husband either "in accordance with the narcissistic ideal of the man whom [she] had wished to become" (167), or to

replace/impersonate/re-present the relationship with her father that she could not have. She would also wish to bear a (male) child in a doomed attempt (162) to gain for herself "the boy's far superior equipment" (160) (in case this phrase is not self-explanatory, it means a penis and testicles). What she could not/should not be was clever (able "to carry on an intellectual profession") (159), creative (except as a spinner or weaver, which women are uniquely qualified to do by the abundance of their pubic hair!) (167), or challenging (to men).

A woman who appeared to Freud as clever, creative or challenging would be diagnosed as suffering from a masculinity complex, she would be revealing her wish to be a man (to which all of these attributes presumably apply in every case), and was therefore not an adequate, well-balanced woman, suffering, as she should be, from penis envy. So, having defined woman in terms of inferiority, inadequacy and chronically unfulfilled desire, Freud then states that it is this "penis envy" that differentiates woman from man: "...we ought rather to recognise this wish for a penis as being par excellence a female one" (162). How, we are tempted to ask, could it be otherwise? If the wish to have a penis exists, it cannot belong to a man, who surely cannot envy or wish for what he already has.

Freud's thinking reveals his world view that men are the true creators, and reflects an only recently-abandoned medical view of the sperm as the 'active principle' in reproduction, carrying principles of change and variation, while the ovum is only the passive receptor. (Smith-Rosenberg's 1973 article puts the date for the discovery of the function of the ovaries as around the middle of the nineteenth century.) Feminists, using the tools that Freud himself has provided, have revealed Freud's androcentric

underpinnings, and might now point out that it is the woman who is the only creator, as sperm can be separated from men and stored for future use, while science is a very long way from creating an artificial womb. They might even see writings such as Freud's as revealing a frustrated creation complex, or 'womb envy'.

As an academic of the late twentieth-century, Oates is also well aware of these debates, and of the elusive nature of the self in modern philosophy. She approvingly quotes Thoreau's idea of the self as a lens (*(Woman) Writer* 154). In her "Budapest Journal: May 1980", she muses on her own selfhood; she is impersonating "Joyce Carol Oates", here in a most alien, but apparently, to her, appallingly familiar environment (*(Woman) Writer* 343). In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Oates allows Constance Philippa to wonder whether her 'culturally correct' shape, the dressmaker's dummy in the attic, is not more real than she herself is. Oates writes her characters as continually engaging in (re)construction of themselves in response to events and outcomes in their lives – although rarely as self-consciously as Constance Philippa does. For female characters, this activity involves escape *from* the objectification inherent in their present situation, while for male characters the incentive for change and growth more often leads them *toward* a desirable goal.

Moving to a more metaphorical mode, men escape by means of a "cock-up" – they find a loop-hole in the system and exploit it. A man may escape a poor upbringing to become a professional man (as John Quincy Zinn does), or he may, as Nahum Hareton does, simply emerge from literally nowhere to become the valued assistant to a great man. However he does it, he is effectively going "over the wall" to the applause of the onlookers. It is not

difficult to imagine how society would react to a woman's failure to take care of her family the way John Quincy Zinn fails to care for his; and yet "being a good provider for his family" has always been, and is still, considered the major marker of masculinity in American society (Faludi 65). Zinn, as a genius, enters the loophole in the system which allows a man to abdicate this responsibility.

The cap is set on John Quincy Zinn's achievement by his marriage to Prudence Kiddemaster, daughter of Judge Kiddemaster of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, (even if his betrothal occurs by accident!). For women, however, a marriage, even one which may be seen as an escape, a loophole in the system for women, is in fact only a baited trap. It is not an escape from a world defined and controlled by male desires and needs, only from control by the father to control by the husband. It is complete capitulation to the system, a way of becoming a trustee prisoner in the war against women. No-one makes a cock-up that lets a woman escape – she has to find her own "secret passage", often deep inside herself, then find the courage to use it to escape. Samantha Zinn, whose genius is at least equal to her father's, and is completed by the strong practical streak he lacks, will never escape from her assigned role until she finds her secret passage to freedom. Women escapers can't always "see" where they are going, but must press on alone or return. The danger of the secret passage is that in a blind tunnel may lie death or madness – but even these can be seen as positive outcomes in escaping the imprinting of patriarchal imperatives on women. Certainly Sarah Kiddemaster does not seem unhappy in her cracked, crazed mind.

Oates has made no attempt in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* to present a realistic

view of nineteenth-century America. The men in this novel stride fearlessly across the endless landscape: Judge Kiddemaster, a famous Jurist; various appalling members of the du Pont family; John Quincy Zinn, a transcendentalist and inventor; Charles Guiteau, the assassin of President Garfield; Nahum Hareton, who slips through a crack in time; Malcolm Kennicott, an epic poet; Mark Twain, the famous writer. Against them, the feats of their lovers, wives, mothers and daughters may seem small, but, measured in terms of their cost, they are enormous. Fame may come for these women, but it will be fleeting and expensive. However, at the end of the novel, the women have won. Although they must still live in a patriarchal society, each has travelled down her secret passage to freedom, and come to terms with the objectifications that confine her, and, indeed, the future of Bloodsmoor is in their hands. The process by which this has happened can be traced in the escape attempts of each character.

Chapter Two: The objectifications that female characters suffer

All the moulds that the women characters of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* are forced into serve in some way to support the male characters. Some objectifications are negative, lowering the status of the woman, often in her own eyes as well as those of the wider community, while confining and restricting women to these approved roles. Other objectifications may seem positive, that is they raise the status of the woman in the eyes of society, but they still give a woman no more freedom than the stereotypes that degrade her. In this way those expressions of humanity in women which are useless or threatening to men are suppressed, while those which support the status quo are encouraged.

Oates has consistently analyzed family relationships in her fiction, and her conclusions are uniformly bleak. As Mary Allen said in the chapter on Oates in her 1977 book *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the 1960s*:

The dread of motherhood combines a woman's fears of men, among other things for causing pregnancy, and of children, both beyond her understanding and control. Like most male writers, Oates accepts the traditional roles of women. But where

the male point of view suggests that motherhood should be a positive experience, Oates shows it to be an awful one, as it brings to a climax the lifelong fears and hostilities her women have experienced (148).

I do not consider that Oates does, or has ever, even in her early fiction, accepted "the traditional roles of women" as inevitable; rather, in such characters as Clara in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Nadia in *Expensive People*, Maureen and Loretta in *them*, Helene in *Wonderland*, and perhaps most clearly Ardis and Elena in *Do With Me What You Will* she has not only exposed the harm that these roles do to women, and the silent belief in women as "other" that underpins them, but she has also shown how women consistently develop escape strategies for survival.

The question of family obligations is a constant subtext in the narrative of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. Oates has captured perfectly the last throes of father-centred pre-Freudian thinking on the subject in the Narrator's attitude; after all, the whole of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is ostensibly a history of John Quincy Zinn (and, as must be inevitable, his family – who quickly take over the story!). But of course, Oates is writing (and we are reading) very much in the light thrown by Freud, and also in the further light thrown on Freud by feminist deconstruction of his work – which is not to say that all this glaring light means we see more clearly, but we certainly see differently.

Underlying all objectification in a patriarchal society, whether of men or of women, is the premise that it is what men achieve that is of significance, and that the role of women is to be a very present aid, both practical and emotional, in that achievement. The Narrator of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* naturally supposes all of the Zinn women to support John Quincy Zinn. Indeed, Prudence receives her highest accolade as "an excellent wife, who

took her marital vows with utmost seriousness" (14); this is reported at a moment in the plot when she is frustratedly, furiously angry with her husband's shiftlessness and total inability to provide even the smallest necessities of life for his family. The Narrator might take Prudence's wordlessness, "meekly lowered" gaze and "hands clasped together" to portend patient resignation; it could appear more like extreme self-control preventing her husband's death from strangulation! The "Journalist-at-Large" Watkins, in his article on John Quincy Zinn in his "Unsung Americans of Genius Living Now Unknown" series, describes Prudence as a "paragon of wifedom – an uncomplaining helpmeet to her beloved spouse" (396). The description reportedly leaves her "deeply moved"; we are left to imagine to what!

Samantha, as a young girl, is an innocently whole-hearted supporter of her father, actually driving young men away in boredom at her constant reporting of her father's inventions (most of which will never be more than lines on the page). However, Samantha's position as her father's assistant is tacitly expected to be just a time-filler, until she marries. Lacking a husband to support, her proper place is supporting her father. The reality, of course, is that it is Samantha who is the successful inventor, and John Quincy Zinn is her inspiration, not the other way around.

The woman as helpmeet is raised to a higher pedestal in the special case of the woman who is inspirational: the muse. Robert Graves is reported by Oates in *The Profane Art* (48) as having remarked that "A woman is a Muse or she is nothing." It is typical of John Quincy Zinn that he seems not to need inspiration; but he would bumble on forever achieving nothing were he not pushed by Prudence and silently aided by Samantha, in whose

character Oates gives us a clear example of the unacknowledged use of women's inspiration and activity, by men, to create art or other objects of transcendental significance to society.

This larger-than-life representation of woman as muse is echoed in the sanctification of motherhood, which seems to be an irresistible force which eventually rolls over every object in its way, even feminism. It is a very convenient way of controlling women, as every autocrat from cult leaders to kings have found out. The strong and important bond we call maternal love, the natural urge of the female to protect her young for the continuation of the species, combined with the long period of socialisation that is required for the continuation of human society, has been used shamelessly for purposes ranging from religion to sales of soap. It is both a strength and a weakness for women, as it allows a lever on their actions and emotions, but it is also a motive to fight and endure. However, a mother in a male-dominated society may love her individual children equally, but she must relate very differently to her sons and to her daughters. In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Oates has only one strong mother/son nexus, that of Octavia and the appalling Godfrey, to whose wishes she is expected to bow in every possible way, but almost all of the women characters have relationships with their mothers.

The relationship between mother and daughter in patriarchy is fraught. Constrained by objectification herself, and by the need to raise her daughters to fit a similar mould, it is difficult for the mother to relate to the daughter as a whole adult. DuPlessis suggests, in *Writing beyond the Ending*, that one strategy women writers have used to defer the final closing off of the path to quest (particularly in the ventures of writing

and painting) by the choice of the path to romance (the outcome of which must be marriage and full-time service to the other), is to gift the quest to their daughters: "The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother's often thwarted talents" (93). In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, as in much of Oates's fiction, there are few women who are wholly engaged with the task of motherhood; Octavia, in this as in many other things, is the exception.

Prudence does not seem to have a very close relationship with her 'sainted' mother Sarah; Sarah seems to have retired from life and its demands after the birth of her daughter. Edwina completely abrogates motherhood, even in name, soon after the birth of Deirdre, escaping for a while to England, and there is no suggestion she gifts any quest to her daughter, whose objectification as lost orphan is a particularly uncomfortable one, but one which leads her to a particularly absorbing quest of her own. The great task Deirdre must undertake, as the "dark, dangerous other" (Creighton 1992 46) is in spite of, or possibly even because of, her mother's absence. Edwina, meanwhile, has taken any instinct for motherhood she might have had, and, denied the opportunity to express her true feelings and remain a respected member of society, twisted it into an abuse of the power of her position in the family by constantly interfering in the relationship between Prudence and her daughters.

Although Prudence has come to child-bearing relatively late, she has managed to bear four live daughters, and have several miscarriages. Although her role as mother/socialiser seems, throughout most of the novel, to be usurped by Edwina, it is tempting to suggest that her own disappointment with married life leads her somehow to subvert the message

that society (in the very present shape of Edwina) is giving her daughters about their expected roles. It is only when it seems that Samantha will refuse to marry Cheyney, and thus bring the final disgrace on her family, that she belatedly interferes. Here, like Ardis in *Do With Me What You Will*, she is in the role of marriage-broker, a tool of her own father, rather than an actor in the best interests of her daughter.

The reader might wonder if she has gone blind, when she refers to Cheyney as "an altogether agreeable young gentleman" (415), when he is neither all together, agreeable, young, nor a gentleman. In her hypocritical pointing out to Samantha that marriage to Cheyney will "provide...an invaluable opportunity for the exercise of Christian charity", she is consigning her youngest daughter to an appalling fate on behalf of the Zinn/Kiddemaster family. If Samantha married Cheyney, at worst she might be infected with whatever ghastly venereal disease he suffers from and die, horribly, in short order. At the least, she would have to sleep with him and his "queer red-flushed voluptuousness", his skin "now reddened, dry, and flaky on every visible inch", his baldness revealing a "patched and flaky scalp", and his eyes now "small, squinting, reddened and virtually lashless" – and he is (only!) thirty-five to her eighteen. He does not even know (or care) which Zinn daughter she is.

Prudence's lack of support for her last daughter is quite rightly rewarded by her daughter's vision of her as "a dragon to devour [Nahum] alive" (417). The intersection of male priorities into the mother-daughter relationships at Bloodmoor is completed, and, Samantha's attempt to allay her mother's fears by pretending to be uninterested in men or marriage having failed, she is forced to flee, like her sisters, from the lethal love of

her family.

This might seem very natural to us, in an age when ambivalence about one's family is almost compulsory, but the Narrator does not doubt how unnatural she is. Prudence refers to Samantha's love for Nahum as an "outlaw romance" (408), but the Narrator goes further. She refers to Samantha's (surely natural!) revulsion at Cheyney's changed appearance as, quite simply, "very wrong", and to Nahum and Samantha, running away for love but not contemplating marriage, as "Ungrateful children! Shameless sinners!...none but the lowliest fiends in hell might guess where they have gone." It seems that letting romantic love and self-satisfaction come before family obligations was the greatest sin a woman might commit in the nineteenth century.

In the twentieth century, the need of daughters to escape from mothers is a very common plot in fiction by women, and is the subject of a 1984 article by Sue Ann Johnston, entitled "The Daughter as Escape Artist". She refers to the irony that women rebelling against their mothers find that

They do not go far, however, before they realise not that they cannot go home again, but that they have never left....the heroines' escape from the mother becomes a search for her that is also a search for the self....Before they can become individuals with capacity for mature dependence [I assume this means give and take in relationships], these heroines face the awesome task of emerging from an overly close identification with their mothers (10).

The journey, or physical escape, is emphasised here, and this certainly happens to all of the Zinn daughters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. They must understand and learn to subvert the family relationships that confine them before they can be free to love.

The daughter's relationship with her mother may be typically strained at

best and fractured at worst; her relationship with her father is similarly underpinned with ambiguity and stress. At Bloodsmoor, fathers are in short supply; Deirdre has lost two, and her ghastly dream-narrative (18 & 485), which apparently causes her dead father to rescue her, is clearly motivated by desire for a father-substitute, a protector; she must compete with her sisters for this scarce commodity, thus learning the debilitating lesson that women must compete for men's attention.

To be worthy of her father's love, a nineteenth-century daughter had to accept her role as a family possession, her value enhanced by her purity and obedience. This is a view which is still accepted and condoned by our society, as Oates showed in a small episode in *Do With Me What You Will*, set in the early 1970s. Marvin, a successful Chicago lawyer, is defending a man named Cole, whose crime is that, enraged by his fourteen-year-old daughter's leaving home, he goes to the tenement building where she is living with a group of other young people:

...the father kicked the door in and began screaming at them....The girl and the others stared at him and saw a man of middle age, in a windbreaker, weeping, holding a Springfield in his hands. A few seconds later three people were dead, including the daughter, and a fourth...was dying, part of his face blown away (420).

For this appalling crime, out of all proportion to his daughter's triggering action, the father, described as a "*shattered man*", is not forgiven by society, but is actually found *Not Guilty*. It was his right, as a father, to defend his family's honour, which his daughter, by attempting to escape from his influence, had sullied.

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, it is Grandfather Kiddemaster who is the patriarch of the family, John Quincy Zinn having proved, at this as at all else, useless at execution of his duty. (When his duty is in fact execution,

or at least the invention of an instrument of execution, he invents the electric bed, perhaps to symbolise for him the torture of the demands of the marriage bond!) Malvinia, never afraid to voice social ambiguity (although she is to prove cripplingly afraid of expressing her sexuality), sums up the situation as early as page eight. When she is asked, at a social gathering, by an embarrassed Octavia "'And is it we whom they stare at, so frankly?'" she "laughingly murmured, in reply, 'Nay, I think it is Father's five daughters; or Grandfather's five aspiring heiresses.'"

When her sisters have fled, Samantha's position as an economic asset is clarified, partly because Judge Kiddemaster intends, effectively, to sell her to the du Ponts as part of a business deal, and partly because she is far better at the Zinn family business than John Quincy Zinn himself. The Narrator expresses it thus:

She did his mathematics for him (for he had never mastered that discipline); she copied over his inky diagrams and charts, oft expanding them in scale, so as to make their dimensions clearer; she betook herself through the woods, to Judge Kiddemaster's library, to check certain references...she has taken from Mr Zinn the burden of conversing with most visitors, including those manufacturers who journeyed to Bloodsmoor to offer research assignments to him...and to induce them—in most cases—to raise their efforts by at least a few hundred dollars; a feat Mr Zinn would have been incapable of doing...(279-80).

All this work brings her no credit, however. In Watkins' article, Samantha's work is never mentioned, and her inventions are credited to her father. Her only acknowledged value is as a precious possession of her Grandfather (her father being presumably too useless at business to play a part in the transaction), to be heartlessly given to the appalling Cheyney, traded for a connection with the du Pont family (412-3). The du Pont name being associated, in the twentieth-century, largely with the invention and manufacture of arms and environmentally suspect chemicals, Oates's ironical

eye here places a Zinn daughter, Samantha the practical inventor of things to ease domestic burdens, in opposition to officially-sanctioned, patriarchally approved, life-destroying forces. She does this again in Samantha's (and Nahum's) opposition to John Quincy Zinn's work on the electric bed, and in Deirdre's (accidental?) burning of his formula for the atom bomb. Thus the rebellion of the daughters against the father in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* symbolises life-enhancing rather than life-destroying forces in the human psyche.

The value of (female) virginity, the purity of the daughter, as insurance for (male) inheritance mores has been well documented, the rise of patriarchy having been connected with the knowledge of the male role in human reproduction⁵. However, the objectification of woman as virgin, like those of muse or mother, may lead to all sort of excesses. It becomes connected with the need to keep sexual matters secret, as knowledge might bring the temptation to experiment, and this in turn leads to single women being treated as children, when ignorance and innocence are confused.

Preventing women from experiencing their sexuality as positive is still a strong force in society. Wolf, Faludi and French all maintain that sex is still primarily valued for the pleasure it gives men, and women still collude in all sorts of ways to ensure the continuance of this myth. Women's interest in male strippers is trivialised, for example; more seriously, women undergo surgery for breast enlargement which destroys all erotic sensation in their breasts, or connive in the clitoridectomy of their daughters. Neither of these procedures improves the sexual satisfaction of women; both cater to a

⁵ See, for instance, Gerda Lerner's 1986 book *The Creation of Patriarchy*.

perceived desire in men; both treat women as objects to be manipulated for men's needs.

The objectification of woman as phallus involves more than her being objectified as a sex object, although it is also that. In common parlance the phallus has come to be identified with the penis, and any upright object may be referred to as a phallic symbol, but using Lacanian terms, a phallus may be any object that is desired by the powerful as one of the symbols of power, such as a sports car, or a woman who is considered beautiful (Grosz, 1989). The man who has such a woman on his arm when he enters a room has what other men want – and it is not a living, breathing woman with whom he can interact, share his life and come to love for ever (this is what he thinks women want from him, and he is certainly not a woman). As Naomi Wolf puts it in *The Beauty Myth*: "What little girls learn is not the desire for the other, but the desire to be desired" (53).

Like the object of courtly love of an earlier age, this woman who is a phallic symbol is, by definition, not a person – she is timeless, fixed, like an orb or a crown. She can never change in any significant way, or, like the sports car which has deteriorated, she may find herself exchanged for a newer model. Particularly she can never age, or be in any way challenging to the man who possesses her. She is, in a very real sense, a doll, whose desirability as a commodity is defined purely by her appearance.

As far as the young women of Bloodmoor are concerned, to be beautiful, that is, to present themselves as at the height of their sexual attractiveness to men, is a duty they owe to society. In the first few pages

of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, Deirdre's main sin seems to be that she has failed in her duty to be beautiful – to present herself in such a way as to minimise what are seen as her failings. Her plainness is caused by "her pale, leaden, lugubrious countenance, and the sinister *recalcitrance* with which her brightly-dark eyes beheld the world" (5). Her countenance is also described as *greenhued* (7) – this also being a play on the jealousy which she supposedly has for her sisters, as well as a reference to chlorosis, that supposed ailment which blighted the lives of many women (especially the unmarried) in the nineteenth century. The Narrator states clearly that the Zinn girls "lived in a society in which Beauty – whether of face, or form, or manner, or attire – was very much a requisite, for the female sex" (8). Oates is not unaware that the same requirements still hold, and women are still exhorted (more than ever, if Wolf is to be believed) that it is their duty to be beautiful. Deirdre is obviously *not trying hard enough*. It is all that is asked of her, that she be beautiful, and she will not co-operate! Malvinia's attempts to reconstruct her adopted sister, using her own cast-offs, illustrates the hegemonic principle underlying the burden of beauty. The imposition works only because it is accepted by women as a duty; as the Narrator shows, most women will conscientiously seek out and magnify their best features. Even Samantha, who seems not yet to have reached her menarche, and is considered "sadly plain as a tin spoon", can be described as "petite, fairylike, and possessed of an elfin charm" (8). She has all the ingredients for beauty, but is ruined because "tumultuous thoughts...ceaselessly tormented her brain, causing her to wrinkle her brow, and gnaw at her lower lip" (8).

On the other hand, Constance Philippa's main fashion flaws are her height, the length of her stride, and her wish to walk alone in the woods. She has,

however, a "Grecian cast of features – stubborn, noble, haughty, chaste – which would have done honor to a bust of antiquity..." (p33-4). She is described in words more fitted to androgyny than to female beauty, and more than one Bloodsmoor sister's secret resistance and future escape is foreshadowed by the sentence: "Constance Philippa observed of [Samantha], grimly, that she would, one day, *grow up*, and become a *lady*: for had she any choice?" (65).

Beauty, in the eyes of Bloodsmoor's Narrator, is not reflected only in appearance, it resides also in appropriate behaviour, what she refers to as the "*intrinsic* sort and the *cultivated*" (5). Thus Octavia, who seems to be inclined to plumpness, was deemed to have matured very early and was forced into a "full-figure corset" at the age of ten, "it being something of a scandal to allow the little girl to appear, even in the nursery, with her flesh unbound and aquiver...in every direction" (41). This (to our eyes) appalling abuse of a little girl's body foreshadows her miserable fate as the wife of a bondage fetishist. Octavia's beauty, in the Narrator's eyes, lies in her "womanly" (ie motherly, forgiving and passive) nature.

Malvinia, the actress, positively labours at being beautiful, with gratifying results – she becomes "'The Rose of Kiddemaster Garden,' as all of Bloodsmoor was wont to call her" (50). She understands full well that her society confuses sexuality with beauty (as does ours), and sees this as her future passage to freedom. Although the Narrator cannot admit that Malvinia (or any of the Bloodsmoor daughters) is consciously aware of her sexual self, Malvinia is very clearly constructing herself as a phallus. This construction began "as a very young child" (50), when she frequently demanded to know not only if she was pretty, but if she would be "pretty

enough" – enough for what, is left unsaid. Her manner is "queenly" (53), a constant source of irritation to the down-to-earth Constance Philippa. The conflict between these two, in retrospect, is easily understood – the irritation of the lesbian for her sister whose only aim in life is to attract men on the one hand, and the frustration of the ambitiously heterosexual woman, who finds her *raison d'être* constantly being undermined by her sister's scathing remarks, on the other.

Part of Malvinia's charm for the Narrator, and part of her irritation for the other Zinn daughters, is her perfect willingness to assist her less fortunately-endowed sisters to make the most of themselves. Her particular keenness is to assist Deirdre with her clothes and hair – "I insist that you allow me to refashion you" (484) – assistance which Deirdre accepts very reluctantly. Her words, after the final of these sessions, strike at the heart of the unnatural relationship between sexuality and beauty that Oates reveals in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*:

What do I see? I see a clown; a fool; a bewigged doll; a poppet; a marionette; a manikin; a most garishly prepared *young lady*, not at all different from the rest. I see, in short, no-one I recognise, or care to know (62).

Although the standard of beauty may have shifted since the nineteenth century, beauty is still set as a standard that women have a duty to follow:

Female sexuality is turned inside out from birth, so "beauty" can take its place, keeping women's eyes lowered to their own bodies, glancing up only to check their reflections in the eyes of men (Wolf 1991 155).

The duty to be beautiful is still buttressed by pseudo-religious injunctions, in such popular books as *The Total Woman* (Marabel Morgan 1975, cited by Daly 232), and fleshed out by commerce, as documented by Wolf (1991) and by Faludi throughout *Backlash*. The theory of evolution, the creation myth of the late-twentieth-century in the West, is presently interpreted in such

a way that it appears that "survival of the fittest" means that males will pick the most beautiful female as their mate, not, as in Darwin's theory, that they will pick the woman biologically best fitted to continue the species.

Medicine, now as in the nineteenth century, is divided on the usefulness and the danger of the objectification of women as beautiful objects. Then, tight-lacing was both hailed as an aid to enhance beauty and reviled as a danger to women's health, as documented by Haller and Haller; now, some doctors set up clinics to perform what has become known as cosmetic surgery, and proclaim the right of women to have their beauty enhanced by these means, while other doctors campaign to prevent them. Some doctors write books promoting quick weight-loss plans, while others claim it is not possible to safely lose any weight at all, and that the dangers of obesity have been exaggerated.

What we might call the pathology of beauty, the extent to which the search for a culturally admirable appearance may cause health problems, is well illustrated by the medical problems associated with the type of corset worn by the female characters of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. In *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*, Haller and Haller go into some detail on the construction of corsets and the effects of wearing them, revealing a horror story of torture, pain, and chronic illness.

The corset encased the woman so tightly that she was unable to bend, turn, or stand for any period of time, and found any but the most gentle exercise next-to-impossible. Thus the wearing of a corset clearly marked a woman as not of the working class. Haller and Haller put this clearly:

[T]he habit of tight-lacing seemed to be inescapably compelling to the majority of middle-class women. There seemed to be a symbolic interplay between their willingness to suffer its contorted shapes and the complicated ritual of fashion which conditioned them to look with virtuous indignation at those women who shunned the infernal device....Perched like a gilded hourglass...the corseted woman provided the aesthetic touch for many of the false values of the time. She was a sculptured vessel (148).

It may be as well to note that it is not only the Victorian woman who was willing to submit to 'body sculpturing' to meet the requirements of current fashion; it has, in fact, reached a new zenith in modern cosmetic surgery, and looks of "virtuous indignation" are still received by those whose body shape does not conform to the current norm of slim and boyish with the addition of large breasts.

Actual medical conditions directly caused by tight-lacing include malformed ribs, collapsed lungs, raised blood pressure, prolapses of the uterus (pressure causing the uterus to protrude down into the vagina), atrophying of organs if begun while the girl is still growing, and malformation of the pelvis with subsequent birthing problems. There are many references in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* to the nostrums that the women resort to; the constant pain of wearing a corset may have led many women to narcotic addiction. The continual shortness of breath certainly caused fainting, and must have caused and worsened circulatory problems. One contemporary doctor even went so far as to refer to gynaecology as "a postcorset medical specialization"⁶, as if it were only the corset that caused women's reproductive systems to have medical interest. However, it seems hollow to exclaim at the horrors of genital mutilation in the Third World, or tight-lacing in the nineteenth-century, when, presently, thousands of Western

⁶ Charles Cannaday, in a speech delivered to the International Medical College in Rome in 1894; cited in Haller & Haller 169.

women every year voluntarily submit to cosmetic surgery, to the burning of their facial skin with acid, or to living on fewer daily calories than the workers at Bergen-Belsen received.

It used to be said that a woman who is a phallus might be "the power behind the throne". This is a meaningless term; the real power lies with the throne. Any power that may be wielded by a phallus behind a throne is dependent entirely on the throne itself, and even the most enthralled throne may, and probably will, one day decide that he (or she) needs to update or remodel the current phallus. At this point the phallus's hidden personality may emerge; when threatened, phalluses have been known to kill to retain their position. Thus the mask of purity, beauty, or loyalty may be replaced with one of promiscuity, greed, and murderous intent, strengthening belief in the myth of the treachery of woman.

The false position of Woman as Muse, Phallus or Madonna can only be undermined by the daily lives of real, flesh and blood women. While few will find it necessary to kill to retain privileges, Oates's novels explore the ways, including murder, that women escape the objectifications that confine them. For example, Allen points out that women characters in Oates's earlier books sometimes saw beauty as a liability, and deliberately made themselves unattractive to men (137) – while still objectified, at least they chose their own fate. Similarly, the women of *Bloodsmoor* all take the risk of escaping from their fettered futures. But these escape attempts bring danger to the woman concerned, because they are seen as a threat to the wider society.

Bender quotes Carol Smith-Rosenberg (1975) as suggesting that "From the mid-nineteenth-century on, woman had become the quintessential symbol of

social danger" (131), and in her 1973 article "Puberty to Menopause: The Cycle of Femininity in Victorian America" Smith-Rosenberg herself refers to "The insatiate and promiscuous woman" as "one of man's most primitive and fearful fantasies" (64). In *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, this danger is symbolised by The Mark of the Beast, an unexplained curse that devolves on some members of the Bloodsmoor family at birth, and is recognisable by the presence of a widow's peak and pointed ears. Grandfather Kiddemaster has it, as do Edwina, Malvinia, Deirdre, and the appalling Godfrey.

If women are not sexual, but only sexual objects, any woman who shows signs of trying to understand and use her sexuality must be objectified as wicked, as she is threatening to undermine the current order. The Narrator of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* has internalised this particular objectification very successfully. To protect itself against the consequences of sexual disorder, a society will assign characteristics that will symbolise danger in this area, and the Narrator assiduously points out these signs to us at Bloodsmoor. They indicate a pervasive fear that boundaries relating to sexual behaviour will be breached.

Aunt Edwina is the Bloodsmoor family mentor in all matters to do with contact between the sexes. Bearing The Mark of the Beast, she is naturally inclined to excessive desires of the flesh herself, and so is uniquely placed to offer advice in these matters. The lengths to which she herself is prepared to go to escape the objectification of fallen woman involve her intimately in Deirdre's fate – her refusal to acknowledge Deirdre as her daughter and Deirdre's subsequent series of temporary homes is a crucial factor in Deirdre's unhappiness, and, perhaps, in the rich 'alternative reality' that eventually provides her with a career and a means of escape.

In her case, the Mark of the Beast seems to indicate a spiritual, rather than a sexual, lack of conformity, an indication of herself as representative of the subconscious and uncontrollable in this pre-Freudian world.

The tight binding of hair is one sign of sexual propriety. When the sisters are discussing Deirdre's abduction, Malvinia, who has the Mark of the Beast but who is completely unable to accept her own sexuality, "visibly shudders" when she remembers her sister's hair "coming loose...and tumbling in a promiscuous tangle, down her back..." (119 – my emphasis). Similarly, Delphine Martineau Ormond's hair, when Philippe Fox rescues her, is "*falling in a dishevelled tumble to her waist*" (601, emphasis in text). Of course, several layers of clothing are also necessary for propriety, including padding if the natural shape is not 'womanly' enough (poor Constance Philippa is encased not only in clothes and a corset, but must endure horse-hair pads where she is too slender!), and the subduing of unruly flesh by tight-lacing – the custom which was the direct cause of much chronic illness among women in the nineteenth-century.

Smith-Rosenberg (1973) gives many examples of the way control in women in the nineteenth-century was reported to be closely allied to their reproductive system:

"Women's reproductive organs are pre-eminent" one mid-century physician explained in typical phrases. "They exercise a controlling influence upon her entire system, and entail upon her many painful and dangerous diseases. They are the source of her peculiarities, the centre of her sympathies, and the seat of her diseases. Everything that is peculiar to her, springs from her sexual organisation." (59)

In her "Budapest Journal", Oates quotes, presumably from a pamphlet, a hypnotic list of maladies which, it is claimed, may be eased or cured at the Margitsziget Spa, which she visited on 25 May 1980, by its thermal waters,

which were "known in the early fifteenth-century and most fully recognised in the nineteenth-century" (336). *A Bloodsmoor Romance* was published in 1982; some of the list of afflictions that Edwina and Sarah suffer from is lifted straight from this source (528 & 123), and one of the places that Edwina visits to try to cure herself is a "Margitzpara Spa, in Virginia". As we see her do so often in this book, Oates has cleverly entwined historical watering places and sanatoria and her own invention.

Figure Three on the next page contains a table of the complaints endured by Edwina and Sarah, sorted as to their acceptance or otherwise as 'real' by the medical profession today – not that today's medical opinions should be taken as speaking the final word any more than those of 100 years ago! It is interesting that all but one of the 'real' illnesses are either caused by tight-lacing, or are common complaints of age which are made much worse by this practice. The only exception is locomotor ataxia, which, as Figure Three shows, is "a degenerative disease of the spinal cord, marked by loss of control over the muscular movements, mainly in walking". It is particularly appropriate that the two ladies complaining of this particular disease are, at the time, engaged in walking (without any apparent difficulty), as they perform the necessary task of chaperoning Constance Philippa and her fiance the Baron, Edwina having left her sickbed for this express purpose.

Diseases suffered by women characters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*:

Real: *hypertension*: raised blood pressure; exacerbated by tightlacing.

polyarthritis: arthritis in several joints: exacerbated by tight-lacing & lack of exercise.

myositis: inflammation of the muscles; probably, mostly the effects of tight-lacing.

nervous dyspepsia: indigestion; exacerbated by tight-lacing, diet & lack of exercise.

spondylarthritis ankylopoietica: vertebral arthritis, productive of a morbid adhesion of the bones of the spine; would cripple, and eventually paralyse.

locomotor ataxia: loss of muscle co-ordination, especially in the extremities; is a serious degenerative disease of the spinal cord, marked by loss of control over muscular movement, especially in walking.

Imag.: *ovarian neuralgia*: neuralgia means "pain along the course of a nerve" – but ovaries are not well supplied with nerves. Perhaps actually cramps from constricted digestive systems?

neurasthenia: "condition/state of nervous exhaustion"; not now used as a diagnosis, may be depression or chronic fatigue syndrome.

discopathia: suffering, feeling, disease or morbid affliction of something – the discs between the vertebra?

hysteriopathia: suffering, feeling, disease or morbid affliction of the uterus. Too vague to be useful.

fetus "turned to stone": probably fetus which has died *in utero*.

plasmon in the blood: completely untraceable

spondylosis: simply means the action, process, state or condition of the vertebra

defatigation: no trace. Probably chronic fatigue syndrome and/or depression.

catarrhus inflammation of the female organs: discharge from the vagina; not in itself a symptom of disease, but open to this reading by an anxious or ignorant doctor.

Medical terms in this table are taken from *The Macquarie Dictionary*. Interpretation of the information contained in its pages is solely the responsibility of the writer.

Figure Three: 'Women's Complaints' from *A Bloodsmoor Romance*

Like the early tight-lacing of Octavia, the fuss concerning chaperonage is another example of Edwina's scrupulous watchfulness in action. Edwina considers that chaperonage has become crucial in the light of the scandal concerning Deirdre's disappearance, but Prudence is not fit to fill the role, because she (Prudence) had behaved so scandalously when John Quincy Zinn was courting her: they had often walked about together alone! Chaperonage is necessary, according to the Narrator, to prevent the man becoming inflamed and behaving inappropriately – he might "seize his young lady's hand, or, more distastefully yet,...slip his arm about her waist, or brush his lips against her cheek" (156). If any of these unforeseen events occurred, no matter how repentant the young man might be, "the injury to the young woman's reputation [would be] such that only the most liberal (or infatuated) of gentlemen could see their way clear to forgive; only the most Olympian of temperaments would care to continue with the engagement..." Thus the woman would be held responsible for any lack of control on the part of the man, as well as for any random event which might occur to her. Deirdre, for example, is held wholly to blame for her abduction:

An innocent child indeed – for what child, of good family, is not innocent? – yet, something wilful, and truculent, and brooding, and *indelicate*? Was she grateful to have been adopted by so illustrious a family? Was she devout enough a Christian? Was she not rather furtive in her manner, and stubborn in the melancholy of her visage; and, 'tho a member of the Zinn family for some six years, a *daughter*, and a *sister*, much cherished by all, was she not curiously *faithless*? (4)

Although the Narrator, having reported this, refers to it as "ignorant prattle", she then goes on to blame Deirdre's "dishevelled state of mind" for having put herself in danger by moving a few metres away from her sisters!

Although Constance Philippa is able to rationalise her teenage 'crush' on

Delphine Martineau as "*ridiculous and degrading*" (158), she senses that what she does feel (we might theorise pure terror) at the thought of the "unitary act" is not what she should feel – even allowing for a natural maidenly nervousness. The position of the Bloodsmoor clan, expressed by the Narrator, at the return of Constance Philippa as Philippe Fox, is anomalous. Although Lillian Faderman (1992) has shown that some knowledge about lesbianism was becoming available through popular literature by the end of the nineteenth-century, it is doubtful if any of it would have reached Bloodsmoor! Their fixed position on gender questions forces them to rationalise that their daughter/sister has become a son/brother – although they cannot say so, and must maintain the fiction that Philippe is an 'interested friend' of Constance Philippa. Although the Narrator goes to great pains to distance herself from her material at this point, claiming that the artist is "obliged to *better* the world, and not merely *transcribe* it", she could hardly make a firmer statement that Philippe is a man; she is "a male being...which is to say, a creature, in our species, *of the masculine persuasion!*" (582). The ambivalence of the word 'persuasion' only confuses the issue further – the Narrator sees gender as both fixed and slippery at the same time. Men behave a certain way, women another; but, apparently, one might, in certain circumstances, turn into the other. That Constance Philippa has done this is confirmed, apparently, by Philippe's elopement with Delphine; a woman could not sexually desire another woman; he must be a man. This fetish with correct gender behaviour has an interesting ironical twist; old John Chisum whom Philippe had worked for in the West had assumed she was a homosexual man (596). But even he, broadminded as he appears, never thinks she might be a homosexual woman. As Faderman frequently points out in both her books, if a person wore trousers, that person was a man.

Ironically, Octavia, by far the most actually wicked and devious of the Bloodsmoor women – the only one to be motivated by lust to commit murder – does not have The Mark of the Beast; in fact, she is the perfect incarnation of the Angel in the Home, that popular nineteenth-century female fantasy creation. Octavia is also the only Bloodsmoor woman to be accused to her face of being a sexual deviant. Lucius Rumford, that expert in the nuances of the most extreme forms of sexual deviance, most of which he has visited on his wife against her will, accuses her of being "shameless", a "harlot", and the "Whore of Babylon". And it is all true; she has probably already conceived a child by Sean, and will soon murder her husband to escape being found out.

Malvinia, who bears The Mark, also bears the brunt of society's fear of the heterosexually active woman, and it is a fear that she herself has internalised. Her selection of the name Morloch may seem to the Narrator to be entirely accidental, but Oates's is not. According to the *Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature*, "Moloch or Molech is the name of a deity [perhaps Assyrian or Babylonian] to which the Children of Israel occasionally sacrificed their children by fire" (726). (The *Bloomsbury* Editor refers to Leviticus 18:21 and 2 Kings 23:10; these and other references (2 Kings 16:3, Deuteronomy 12:31) indicate that it is when the Hebrews are straying that they fall into this practice, which seems to somehow be connected with sexual outlawry – homosexuality, bestiality and possibly masturbation.) Moloch is also the name of one of the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*, who is described as "...horrid king, besmear'd with blood/Of human sacrifice, and parents' tears...Their children's cries unheard, that past through fire/To his grim Idol" (i 392). From all sources it carries an aura of unspeakable horror, which is how the Narrator views Malvinia's

expression of sexual passion, with its attendant indignity, and, indeed, how Malvinia herself sees it.

Even as she shows us Malvinia as a young child, the Narrator painstakingly traces her 'unnatural' attraction for the opposite sex, and her malevolent pleasure in it. She has, we are told, a "disposition towards wickedness, in her blood" (264). The incident with the Reverend Malcolm Kennicott, who seems to be a harmless paedophile in the tradition of Charles Dodgson, is presented as though Malvinia somehow 'lead him on'. It is as if her precocity must have some sexual context, in order to make sense of her adult 'deviancy'. The Narrator also attempts to assign to Malvinia the responsibility for the condition of Cheyney du Pont, that raddled, syphilitic wreck, by claiming that he is a victim of her escape. He refers to her as a "whore" (415), which, technically, she is, as she lives by exchanging sexual favours for the necessities of life.

It is in describing Malvinia's terror of her sexual passion that the Narrator reveals most about the threat of women's unleashed desire. Malvinia, having witnessed the effect of her passion on various gentlemen, attempts to quell it by starving herself, and by bathing constantly. When intercourse is unavoidable (and it must be for her, as she lives solely by male patronage), she lies as still as she can with literally everything clenched. All these ruses fail her in her encounter with the odious Twain, however:

And then, the fit having come upon her, unstoppable, hideous, Malvinia gnashed her teeth, and ground them furiously together; and gave herself up to coarse, guttural, jocose – indeed, bestial – imprecations, which issued forth from her lovely lips, which, in the candlelight of scarcely ten minutes ago, had looked so pristinely innocent!

...Malvinia Morloch took no mercy upon her lover's consternation, and may, in fact, have had no clear awareness of it, so exuberantly did The Beast force himself into her slender,

writhing body – fitting her arms, and limbs, and torso, and the nether regions of her being, like a powerful hand thrusting itself into a snug and slightly resistant lady's glove! (463)

With this glorious metaphor Oates brilliantly reveals the events as if at first hand, through the Narrator's pen – the violence of Malvinia's passion, the sexual excitement. What this passage also reveals is the hypocrisy of the Narrator's position as virgin spinster/omniscient storyteller, and Oates's own position as conscious constructor of the text, the subtext and the entire world of *Bloodsmoor*.

To be objectified as a spinster is problematic in the world of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. We have already seen how women are blamed for their own unmarriageability as much as for their irresistibility; fulfilment as a spinster is out of the question. And yet, there seem to be some happy spinsters in these pages. In the "modest, but altogether respectable, rooming house for 'single ladies'" where Deirdre is living when Edwina dies, live also

some ten or twelve spinster ladies, all of good middle-class families, and most of an age advanced beyond Deirdre'sall were employed in those feminine skills – that of teaching the very young, or tutoring the invalided, or acting as librarians, or pastoral assistants, or amanuenses – which, 'tho by tradition affording but meagre financial reward, are nevertheless gratifying as occupations, and inestimable, in their quiet contribution to our industrious society (542–3).

Deirdre, among these women, although constantly plagued by money worries, feels "naught but relief" "to dwell alone, husbandless and childless," faintly scandalising the Narrator by her "*pride*" in her single state (543).

The Narrator's salute to these underpaid, overworked ladies, while seemingly generous, may in fact conceal a shudder as she sees the face of lonely old age that she, presumably, may wear one day. As we learn nothing about her background or means of support, it seems fair to

conclude that she has some kind of independent income, which enables her, at least at the present, to write without worry.

As a young woman, Prudence is presented to us as a confident, independent kind of spinster: "There was nothing of maidenly coyness in Prudence", says the Narrator (88), almost approvingly. She proves her lack of interest in culturally feminine mores by shaking hands with John Quincy Zinn – an action the Narrator views with disapproval, not for itself, but for its implications for society:

...at that time, the sexes did not needlessly touch; when introduced, a gentleman merely bowed low, with deep respect, to a lady; and a lady kept her gloved hands clasped together, or purposefully occupied with a fan. A custom I think we have been unwise to abandon (88).

This surprisingly ungrammatical statement does not ring quite true; we feel that the Narrator might approve of Prudence, who has taken the negative implications of her objectification as a spinster and turned them to her own advantage. Spinsters are eccentric; then she can get away with bad manners. Spinsters are wilful; she will force her attentions on John Quincy Zinn. She refuses to succumb to the "simpering" and "sickly" ways of false femininity, as personified by her poetess acquaintance, Parthenope Brownrigg, but it is still beyond her to speak her love until he has spoken first. Although the Narrator at first leads us to believe that it is as a result of properly applied feminine wiles that the engagement eventually occurs, we later learn that it is as a result of Judge Kiddemaster's connivance. He admits that his daughter has "the assurance of a professional career before her, and a substantial income from numerous investments held in trust", but he still wishes to have grandchildren "as much as any man". He goes on to sum up accepted thinking:

"I cannot think (no matter how much I humour little Prudence, and my dear sister Edwina) that a woman's place can be

anywhere outside the household, if she is to be, in the fullest sense of the word, womanly.... For...one is compelled to look with...contempt upon the woman who, refusing to marry, refuses to have children, and to continue her line" (226).

Looking "with contempt" upon women who fail to conform is removed by only a small degree from directing violence toward them. Violence is a constant theme in all Oates's fiction, and it is present, generally reported rather than first hand, in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. The treatment of the child John Quincy Zinn by his father, for example is heart-rending: "So exhausted was the child he had fallen asleep midway through his simple repast...and had been slapped awake by his father, never one to cosset the weak" (192-3). John Jay Zinn's tarring and feathering is given its proper share of horror, rather than the humorous episode this particular kind of mob violence is usually treated as – in fact Oates deliberately makes a point about Hawthorne's light-hearted treatment of this cruel practice in his story "My Kinsman, Major Molyneux" (195).

Oates frequently uses barely-suppressed violence toward women to raise the tension in her novels. As Allen says, she uses the terror of "*the apprehension of violence*" (141):

Here is a writer to read if one dares to know the particular fear there is in being a woman – here and now – even when the surface of life may appear as familiar and safe as a supermarket on a sunny day (159).

The restrictions with which the Zinn women's lives are hedged reflect this constant awareness of danger, and, although the world of *Bloodsmoor* seems too tranquil for the threat of violence to be a serious one, fear may be seen to have led to victim/martyr behaviour as a norm for women in the characters of Edwina and Sarah. Although we have no evidence that actual violence has been perpetrated against them, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that Captain Burlingame and Judge Kiddemaster might

have occasionally been more than a little rough with their wives. When a woman is constructed/constructs herself in this category she will meet with scant sympathy, but it is only a way of expressing resentment at her status – unfortunately not an attractive or productive way. Octavia, who is the only woman we see who, routinely subjected to actual physical discomfort and pain, finds a much more assertive way to escape than into the blind tunnel of illness and drug addiction – murder!

For the Zinn women who chose less conventional lives, violence is even closer. Malvinia and Orlando constantly bicker and fight, Philippe Fox lives the precarious life of a gunslinger, Deirdre's spirits torment her and kill her examiners. Helena's complaint that American rationalists are conducting a "crucifixion campaign" against her, and her reminder to Deirdre that it has not been long since women were burnt as witches in America (297–8), reminds us that all women, especially those who challenge the male order, live in constant danger.

A more subtle means of control than actual violence or its threat is practised by the labelling of women as "irrational". Where the scientific model of thinking is the touchstone of the rational, and only men are trained in it, any attempt by a woman to rationalise is fraught with peril. If a male-based training in logic is confused with innate rationalism, women will be silenced, because any contribution they might make will be discounted – Judge Kiddemaster refers to "the female soul" as "a hornet's nest" (99), with the implications of mindless noise when observed and danger if disturbed.

Attempts to define so-called 'male' and 'female' modes of thought are

dangerous, whether made by nineteenth-century American male fictional characters, or twentieth-century female French writers under the guise of *l'écriture féminine*, because they always carry the possibility of marginalisation of the less powerful. The label "irrational" can be a useful grab-bag for any way of thinking that challenges the male rationalist model, in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, for example, spiritualism. It immediately puts it into a category that suggests that any time spent on it is wasted – not a problem for women who have nothing better to do with their time anyway, but not a suitable pursuit for busy, important men.

John Quincy Zinn, who is no supporter of traditional Christianity, nevertheless "had instructed his womenfolk to expunge from their minds all fanciful thoughts of the occult, wisely teaching that what we know as the Supernatural is but the Natural, imperfectly grasped" (117). Although Oates shows that Spiritualism and Theosophy had been categorised by (male) science as 'irrational' belief systems, the number of people who believe in them in the novel results in an attempt to subject Deirdre's powers to 'scientific' investigation, her reward being that the male establishment will welcome her – on their terms. This attempt to bring her powers under male control has fatal results for the investigators, symbolising, as in Deirdre's burning of John Quincy Zinn's formula, a victory for 'irrational', open-ended female forces against the 'rational', but possibly life-destroying, closure of scientific certainty.

Deconstruction, on the other hand, can often be valuable in using so-called rational thinking to investigate itself, in the same way that we can interrogate a text by Freud using the tools of symbolism and investigation that he himself developed. Oates has done this in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, by

actually quoting passages from marriage manuals of the nineteenth-century, and by providing us with a Narrator who parrots nineteenth-century versions of 'common sense' and 'decency', while giving us the examples of Rumford as a representative of the Christian religion, the patronising, blinkered Dr Stoughton representing rational science, and the feckless, lazy John Quincy Zinn representing humanist Philosophy. It is not a long step to see how our own mores might be fruitfully examined by the ruthless application of our own version of rationalism.

The women characters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* are limited and bound by their position as object in relation to men and by the structure of the family and the expectations placed on them. Confined physically by their clothing and by beliefs regarding their vulnerability and culpability, and intellectually by the limited range of options shown to them, they must each find the entrance to their secret passage before they can escape from their dangerous dependency. They may never find a way out of the maze they must enter, but each of them, even the Narrator, will make her own journey toward independence.

Chapter Three:

How characters come to perceive their objectification

Each woman character in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* eventually comes to perceive her confinement in the prison of male expectations and consequent objectification. All ways of perceiving lead the woman to her secret passage, that dark and mysterious place through which she must travel in her escape attempt.

The secret passage is located somewhere between the woman she feels (or suspects) herself to be and the woman she is allowed to be. As a woman begins to feel confined by her approved persona, her public self, she comes closer to entering her secret passage, and the stronger the 'secret self' becomes, the closer she is to emerging from it. The time spent in the passage may 'show' on the surface as a form of passivity (very common in older Oates novels, and the source of much feminist criticism of Oates); as madness or illness, signifying that the character has become lost in the passage, and may never emerge; or in a period of absent-mindedness or, alternatively, frantic activity, as the character desperately denies that anything could be wrong. Sometimes entry to the passage and exit from it may be almost instantaneous, as if the woman's situation has become suddenly clear to her, and the way out revealed in almost the same second.

This process can be traced in each of the female characters in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*.

In her early novels, Oates was frequently criticised for presenting women as passive observers of their own fate. Creighton stated in 1978:

Characteristically, her central male characters seek emotional release through violence and her central female characters seek protection from emotion in passive withdrawal. Potential liberation through healthy sexuality is a possibility. But very few of Oates's characters--especially very few women--achieve this liberation (165).

However, Oates was not alone in this treatment of female characters. Mary Allen was able to find enough other examples, in the work of both male and female writers, of this view of relationships between the sexes to be able to entitle her 1976 book *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties*, and she called her chapter on Oates "The Terrified Women of Joyce Carol Oates." She saw Oates's often-criticised treatment of sex scenes as reinforcing a non-romantic attitude: "Women most often offer themselves to men as business transactions, and the sooner the matter is done with the better." Thus "...it is not mere reticence that is responsible for the swift, non-erotic scenes of lovemaking for Oates" (136).

Joseph Petite, writer of several articles on Oates, states that Oates thinks that women's identity depends on being loved: "This dependence, it seems, is one of Oates's assumptions about love" (Petite 225). He sees Oates as advocating romance as an escape from the objectification present in conventional marriage, and this as a flaw in Oates, that she believes that love freely chosen (ie romance) is more fulfilling and self-affirming than a marriage chosen as a means to gaining an identity. This is based on Oates's statement, which he cites in a 1984 article, made when writing about her poem "You/Your": "...it is from a woman's point of view, her befuddlement

at her dependence on a man, upon a man's loving her, from which she will get whatever identity she possesses." The use of the word "befuddlement" here is the clue that this is not Oates's assumption about an ideal in relations between men and women; this is how she sees the reality. The identity is rooted in befuddlement, not in being loved. In Oates's work, especially the early books, adult women discover, to their horror, that the only identity they may assume is that of wife; if they are tempted into escaping this through extra-marital love (romance), they will be unsuccessful; they will simply have exchanged one trap for another. Petite points out that, in many Oates stories, the woman eventually finds herself in at least as bad a state after escaping marriage for love as before. This is a fault in his analysis, not in Oates's writing. It is the hope that romance brings that is the trap, and Oates is at pains to point this out. Oates is assuming the role of front-line reporter in the war between the sexes; Petite has taken it that she approves of the situation.

Octavia's innocent maidenly dreams may have been of a loving husband and a calm, warm married life. In the event, her secret passage is especially dark and chilling, despite, or perhaps because of, the Narrator's attempt to make it appear inviting as a Christian marriage. On the eve of her wedding, which she sees as an escape from spinsterhood to becoming the mistress of her own home, she suffers a moment of, for her, unusually psychic prescience; images of death mix with the explicitly sexual memory of accidentally seeing the coachman's son naked when they were adolescents. Her commitment to her marriage is symbolised by the burning of the diary she has kept as a spinster, but, contrasted with the expectations of marital bliss she has gleaned from the marriage manuals, the horror of her life as the wife of Lucius Rumford can only be imagined by the reader. Instead of

escaping, Octavia is trapped within the very method she has chosen, the method most sanctioned by society. What she had imagined would be a slightly unpleasant, possibly rather exciting aspect of her new life becomes a horror; her passage turns into a torture chamber.

Oates has carefully heightened that horror by the Narrator's treatment of the situation. The minutely detailed descriptions of the Rumfords' sexual life are laced with the Narrator's repeated assertions that she herself knows nothing of "the *sanctity of the marital bed*" (386), the "secrets" of which "are to be forever hidden from one residing in the celibate state, like myself!". Chillingly, she repeats the most intimate details of Rumford's sadistic pleasure without any hint of emotion of her own, except what she can manufacture in an attempt to sanctify Octavia:

All this the new Mrs Rumford bore with saintly diligence, and sweet acquiescence, and not once, in the many years of their wedlock, did a murmur of complaint escape from her tight-pursed lips: not even in the extremities of fright, or pain, or childish bafflement; or the delirium of illness [she had several miscarriages]. She understood that a married woman's duty is solely to her husband, who is her rightful lord and master, and to have sworn to love, honor and obey such a chosen person, at God's own altar, is no burden, but a privilege of the highest type (388).

There can be more explanations for "tight-pursed lips" than saintly submission! Meeting up again with the coachman's son, now a banker, and, it would seem, becoming pregnant to him, gives Octavia the glimpse of an exit. Ironically, the stifling, humiliating sexual ritual she is forced to endure with her husband gives her both the motivation and the means to free herself.

It is Octavia's lust for Sean, and, probably, the resultant pregnancy (which she may be worried that she cannot pass off as Rumford's) that leads her

to the exit of the dank and horrible secret passage she has been in since the awful experiences of her wedding night. It is her husband's direct verbal abuse of her, eventually, that tips her into action. The murder of her son Godfrey is precipitated, similarly, by his cruelty. She will never be able to trust him; she knows (or strongly suspects) he has killed his baby sister, and, while she is not able to bring herself to act to remove him from her life – as with her husband she may be waiting for a situation where she can make the death appear accidental – she is easily able to not act to save him. Her (quite rational) fear that he may kill his baby brother or even herself gives her the motive, and the means is supplied by the womanliness that the Narrator praises her for: she is too busy with her duties as hostess to notice what her son is doing, and, when she does realise,

she found that she was paralyzed, and could not move—nay, not a muscle!—not an eyelid!—nor could she call out, that one of the servants might be alerted, and save her son, from his watery fate! (515).

Similarly, the Narrator clouds Prudence's undoubtedly sexual feelings in her courtship with John Quincy Zinn with a romantic rosy glow. John Quincy Zinn makes this easy by his apparent total disinterest in Prudence, his own future or anyone else's – a life-long habit Prudence would have done well to have considered more carefully at the time! Prudence has thought herself immune to love, but learns that even those who spurn the culturally feminine and boldly shake hands with men may fall to pieces at the sight of a man "erect as a tall candle— burning—brandishing itself—humble yet proud..." (89). Happy as she is in her spinsterhood, with a career and a guaranteed income for life from the Kiddemaster estate, it is the late awakening of Prudence's sexuality that draws her into a relationship with John Quincy Zinn. As it turns out, this could be said to be a blind passage, as Prudence finds the objectifications of the married state far less bearable

than those of the single – although she is now in conformity with the wishes of her father and society. But for her aunt Edwina, sexual passion leads to a much less 'acceptable' outcome.

Edwina's brief sortie into 'normal' human relationships is as dramatic as it is short. The verb she consistently uses to describe the incident is "fell" – usually italicised or capitalised for emphasis. She describes her feelings in her posthumous confession thus: "To *hear*, and to feel my heart *pierced*, and to know almost *beforehand*, what pain would ensue..." (566). She relates how she was attracted by his body, his clothes and his hair, and, like Malvinia, she concurs with society's view of herself as sexually deviant. However, unlike Malvinia, she appears to have gained no pleasure (albeit, in Malvinia's case, mixed!) from the sexual act, and, sadly, becomes pregnant almost as soon as she realises that her "dashing Captain" has married her for her money. It was "Romance, in its numerous masks and costumes" (568) that was responsible for her fall – she was the victim of a carefully planned seduction. Sadly, in her attempt to leave the secret passage of her shame, she seems to have entered a blind tunnel and become a crippled personality – she has become a hypochondriac, refusing to live more than a shadow-life.

For her abandoned daughter Deirdre, the force that cannot be ignored is not so obviously sexual. Oates never clarifies the mystery of Deirdre's powers, which represent the hidden powers of darkness attributed to women. (Oates has herself been called the Dark Lady of American Letters.¹) In Deirdre's case, these powers seem to be very real, capable of causing

¹ By Joe David Bellamy in the title of an interview with Oates in the early seventies.

death to her interrogators. From early childhood, according to the Narrator, Deirdre has been subject to terrifying nightmares, and haunted by the ghost of her natural father, Captain Elisha Burlinghame, of whose existence she is completely ignorant, but whose presence she calls up in her dream-pleadings (18 & 485). She has entered her especially lonely secret passage as an adolescent, in an attempt to escape the objectification of being an orphan. She vigorously resists all attempts by the Zinn girls to include her in their lives, and rebuffs all affection, apparently suspecting its source as being patronage or pity. Having lost two sets of parents entirely (possibly the most careless character in modern literature!), she is forcibly removed from her latest family to adult life by the mysterious abduction/rescue by her ghost-father with which the book opens, and shown the exit from her passage. Her new life, which she at first perceives as free of dependence and its hateful obligations, is that of a famous, rich and successful medium, under the patronage of Madame Helena Blavatsky, one of the real-life figures whom Oates has sprinkled into her fictional text.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was born in 1831 in Russia. She emigrated to America in 1873, and, in 1875, founded Theosophy, a mystical system of religious philosophy claiming direct insight into the divine nature.

Blavatsky was one of a number of women who founded religions in the U.S. in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; others include "Mother" Ann Lee, who brought the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, who began as a sect of Quakers, and were usually called the Shakers, to the US in 1774, and Mary Baker Eddy, who founded Christian Science in 1879.

Western women have traditionally used religion to find their way out of

their secret passages, but they had previously been doomed to failure by the prevailing view of Christianity as a patriarchal religion acknowledging only one father-god-creator. The woman-founded religions of nineteenth-century America broke down these stereotypes, either claiming that divisions of labour based on gender did not exist in the primitive Christian church, and were therefore not intended by Christ (Mary Baker Eddy is quoted as saying "Follow your leader only so far as she follows Christ"), or, like Helena Blavatsky, virtually ignoring the Christian scriptures and formulating an entirely new way of understanding the spiritual dimension of human life, loosely based on Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and practices. The Helena Blavatsky of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* certainly sees her spirituality as feminine as opposed to the scientific, Darwinian model currently being proposed as the rational alternative to Christianity: "That Universe being in any case tiresomely *masculine*, in its grim physicality, while our universe is resplendently *feminine*" (337).

Deirdre has not chosen to be a medium; we might say the spirits, especially that of her father, have chosen her, having protected her all the time she was growing. However, her dependence on her uncontrollable spirits is balanced by a new financial independence, which throws fresh light on both her past and present situations. Her connection with Helena and her early success show her the way out of her first passage of terror and loneliness: she must become recognised as a medium in her own right. She is aware of Helena's intention to exploit her, revealed in Helena's opinion that "The more fantastical the belief, the more [the public] rush to believe! It is a law of nature, my dear child...not to be *wondered at*, but only *applied*" (334). It is comments like this, and Helena's stated wish to become "mother and father alike" (300) to Deirdre, that show Deirdre she must make her

own way or she will become hopelessly lost in Helena's vision.

The cost, eventually, is high. Like Malvinia, she learns that to be famous and rich brings its own limitations, and that she is pitied, feared and desired rather than loved. Her obsessive independence leads to a lack of care for herself, driven by her merciless "voices", and she approaches "as close to madness as a cobweb has breadth" (481). However, even in and after her breakdown, she remains independent of the mores and expectations of her upbringing, to the Narrator's horror. Deirdre's strength, like that of her sisters, will always lie in her following of her own path.

The Narrator considers that "the shadow of the balloon" passing over "idyllic Bloodsmoor", combined with "the *restiveness* of the era", has "infected" Malvinia and Constance Philippa (120). Certainly Malvinia, like her sister, is aware of a feeling of "doubleness" concerning her sexuality, between what she is allowed to feel as a 'normal' young woman, and what she really does feel – lusty! Although the Narrator coyly refers to her falling in love "violently, and blindly", we in our more realistic era would surely refer to her reaction as lust at first sight: "passion of a sort she had never before experienced—save in her most secret and shameful imaginings" (251). Faced with a choice between a future as a simpering, passionless wife or a passionate, fiery lover, Malvinia throws away her past and her future, only to find herself in a more painful objectification as a sexual degenerate – and this in her own mind! The intensity of her sexuality frightens and disgusts her, and frankly terrifies her partners. Acknowledgement of her carnal feelings only intensifies the internal objectification of her self as dirty. She is, perhaps more painfully than any

of the other Bloodsmoor women, truly a victim of negative sexual stereotyping of women. Unlike Octavia, who is able to overcome her role as sexual victim by the acknowledgement of her own sexual feelings for Sean, Malvinia will remain forever in the cage of her own fear. She can only imitate a normal relationship in a 'platonic' marriage with Malcolm Kennicott.

Malvinia's perception of the position of the Zinn girls is acute; she is aware of herself as sexual long before her sisters are. She seems to have been planning her escape for a long time, perhaps even practising her wiles, in an innocent way, on Malcolm Kennicott, and it is being introduced to Orlando Vanderhoffen that gives her the means. However, like Deirdre, it is some time before she can see that she is still not free of objectification as a famous actress; in fact, she has become a virtual slave to the dreadful ambivalence of her situation: her horror of sexual passion must be compromised with the lifestyle of a courtesan. It is not possible for this to continue; the resolution is suitably dramatic as her passion takes over in her long-delayed sexual coupling with Mark Twain, and he flees, naked, "to safety, from the heinous embrace of The Beast" (465), to the amusement of the hotel staff. The narrator may make us smile at this picture, but the contrasting one, of Malvinia alone, is sad, even in its parodic overkill; she is left "grunting, cursing, pulsing, palpitating...on her hands and knees in the damp tangled bedclothes, dazed and ferocious as a tigress—her prey having escaped" – still protesting her innocence (465).

While Malvinia, having been full of anticipation, finds her actual sexual feelings terrifying, the young Constance Philippa spends hours poring over the marriage manuals, trying to clarify exactly what will be expected of her on her marriage night. As the writers of these manuals, women like Edwina,

spend far more time avoiding specifics than dealing with them, it is a vain search. Unwilling to be a sacrificial virgin, Constance Philippa chooses flight rather than risk who-knows-what at the hands of the Baron, whose sadism is apparent even to her innocent eyes. The later revelation that she has become a cross-dressing lesbian⁸ would seem to indicate that, while she may not, at the time, have known what she wanted sexually, she certainly knew what she did not want: a man, and particularly a man who might treat her as an object for his sadistic pleasure. It is his falcons, Adonis and Lucifer, that she desires, or, rather, the power over life and death that they symbolise.

The Baron, who has already buried at least two young wives, mistakes her desire for sexual desire, possibly even as the frisson of a masochist at the sight of blood, and naturally assumes it to be directed at him. He is moved to propose marriage. Significantly, it is first to Judge Kiddemaster that the appeal is made, then to John Quincy and Prudence, and, almost as an afterthought, to Constance Philippa herself, who receives him "stony-cold with fear, unable to grasp what was happening ...with numbed lips." She "had to restrain herself from drawing away when the overjoyed suitor, still on his knees, sought her hand to kiss it" (164-5).

Constance Philippa's reading of the marriage manuals, her troubled relationship with the "dressmaker's dummy that was *her*" (151), but was not

⁸ Due to the Narrator's coyness and anatomical ignorance, it is hard to accurately pinpoint just how we might classify Constance Philippa. If she were alive today, and surgery were available to her, she might opt to become a man. We might call her a stone butch, a transvestite, a transsexual, a "transgendered person" (Feinberg 1994), or a 'passing woman' (1950's lesbian jargon for a "woman who in straight society could pass for a man" (Whatling 1992), but is, without a doubt, a lesbian woman in her own mind and in the eyes of those 'in the life').

her, because it represented her padded and corsetted figure, not her body, combined with her feeling of "doubleness" (150), and her concern with "the personage God meant [her] to be", indicates that she has entered her secret passage through dread of what will be expected of her, sexually, as a wife. She anticipates the mysteries of "the unitary act" with such terror that she must physically remove herself from the Baron, leaving the dummy, the culturally corrected version of her self, in her place. Her exit from her secret passage is marked by her destruction of the whalebone corset, "the which had cost her parents [more probably Judge Kiddemaster] a substantial sum, having been ordered specially from London by way of Madame Blanchet..." (590). Now she can learn to be "the personage God meant [her] to be." The Narrator tells us that this destruction is the "true emblem" of her "fall from grace", "being *inexcusable*, adjusted from any sane perspective, of Christian humanity and decency" (590).

The last 'victim of lust' in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is Delphine Martineau Ormond, who suffers as a result of male lust, and escapes by acknowledging her own. Delphine simply refuses to be objectified, to be treated as an object. Her first escape attempt is motivated by her discovery that her husband⁹ is unfaithful (which he is chronically). She confronts him. When he hits her, she hits him back. When he calls a doctor to subdue her, she tells the doctor what her husband has been doing, "ranting...and displaying such vehemence, and unsanctioned knowledge, as to make one wonder at her breeding" (587). The Narrator does not see fit to reveal, and Oates gives no sub-textual hints, whether Delphine had been aware of Constance Philippa's teenage crush on her, or whether it had been

⁹ It is almost certain that he, like Cheyney du Pont, is syphilitic; he suffers from "an undiagnosed ailment of the nerves, bowels, and spleen" (600).

reciprocated. However, on her first sight of Philippe Fox "on the lawn beneath her window", the window of the room in which she has been imprisoned by her husband as a madwoman because she will not live by the double standards of society, she is lost: "[A]s she gazed through the window...at the comely figure of Philippe Fox on the lawn below, something wicked evidently transpired in her heart, and the tragedy was conceived" (599-600). Unsanctioned sexual passion gives her the impetus to escape, as it has for her friends at Bloodsmoor. No wonder the Narrator feels it necessary at this point to moralise yet again:

...as Jesus in his wisdom bade us not to gaze upon one another, with lust, lest we commit adultery in our hearts, so it was inevitable, should Mrs Ormond...gaze upon *him*, in outlaw circumstances, lust would be experienced: and adultery committed, in the heart (599).

This last scandal at Bloodsmoor is to be the worst, as "the criminal elopement, which took place on a rain-lash'd, gusty All Hallows Eve, was widely talked of, not merely as *adulterous*, but *unnatural*" (599). The development of close female friendship, with all the subversive possibilities it might hold, into the realm of sexual relationships is, quite rightly, thus linked by the Narrator with witchcraft, a subversive female force that has resisted male intervention over many centuries.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar state that all women's writing to other women in patriarchy is subversive – it offers sub-versions of reality that subvert presented (male-perceived) reality. As we have seen, it is traditional for these sub-versions to be dismissed as "irrational". Many of the women in Oates's novels are writers, students, broadcasters or teachers; they make their lives and/or their living from words: Maureen in *them*, Ardis in *Do With Me What You Will*, Bridget in *Unholy Loves*, Edwina, the Narrator, the young Prudence, Malvinia, and Parthenope Brownrigg in

A Bloodsmoor Romance, Monica in *Solstice*, Marya in *Marya: A Life*, Glenys in *American Appetites*, Enid Maria in *You Must Remember This*, Iris in *Because it is Bitter*, and *Because it is My Heart*. More and more, in recent years, Oates has been creating women who use education and communication to both discover the existence of and to negotiate their secret passages. Although their learning is still male-defined and male-dominated, it gives them the tools for clearer self-definition, the possibility of continuing the process of growth, of moving beyond the boundaries they thought existed.

Before her marriage, Prudence's life had revolved around books and ideas, and it is her return to reading newspapers and magazines that inspires her to take up the cause of dress reform. But there is one poem that is a touchstone for Prudence throughout the long years of her marriage: Margaret Fuller's "Dryad Song", which begins: "I am immortal! I know it! I feel it!/Hope floods my heart with delight!". It is hard not to concur with the Narrator, for once, as she refers to these lines as "lush" (83, 148). It is this verse that Prudence recites to herself several times a day when she first meets John Quincy Zinn; it is the cause of distress to her when he recites it in the family circle where she is confined as daughter, wife, mother, and devoted niece of Edwina; and it is what runs through her head as she realises, finally, that she will never inherit from the Kiddemaster estate, and that she is consequently free of any obligation to her family. Although the Narrator is uncharacteristically coy regarding what Prudence might be feeling as Edwina's Will is being read, what she reports rings completely true: "I am freed--of *them*" (603). She remembers the awakening of Romance in her own heart ("I am freed of *them*...and of *it*" (604)), and rejoices that *it*, and the obligations it brought, are dead, and she will be able to join the "campaigners for Dress Reform, Women's Suffrage, and

Equal Rights, and...a *Single Moral Standard*", and escape from her boring, stifling life as an adjunct to her husband.

By means of newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, Octavia has kept track of the doings of Malvinia Morloch, Deirdre of the Shadows, and Philippe Fox, and it is possible that the news of their successes is the only thing that keeps her alive and sane. She is not allowed to discuss this information, even with her mother, but it clearly lights her darkness – a darkness that is not, as the Narrator would have us believe, caused by the death of her husband and son, but rather by their too lusty life.

Finally, newspapers have a part to play in the awakening of the youngest Zinn daughter. It is the publication of Watkins's article about her father which brings Samantha, having recently realised she loves Nahum, to see her situation most clearly. Apart from its complete disregard both for her own work and for her contribution to her father's work, she learns of the removal of her birthmark in infancy by her father. In her discussion of Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark", Judith Fetterley points out that removal of a birthmark signifies the removal of something "not acquired but inherent" (25). The Narrator cannot understand Samantha's resentment at being thus doubly relegated to assistant and experimental material, but, as Fetterley points out, it is an issue of power – most particularly in the case of Samantha, who, unlike Hawthorne's Georgiana, was an infant at the time. It is useless for her father to protest that the birthmark was a blemish which needed expunging – he has one of his own which seems to have done him no harm. In fact, attempts to use the same chemical formula to remove his own birthmark "caused extreme pain" (394) – why did he imagine it would be painless for his daughter? What if the removal had resulted in a

worse blemish? Samantha has no time for hypocrisy – she is the only family member to admit to seeing Rumford as "a pompous old dullard, a bewhiskered fool, a dry-as-dust hypocrite, with all the worst trappings of a Calvinist man of the cloth, and none of the virtues" (405). Although she will not feel the need actually to remove herself from Bloodsmoor until she is in real danger, Samantha knows where to find the exit from her passage long before she is compelled to use it.

In *(Woman) Writer*, Oates refers to the assumption that "the ideal reader experiences an 'enlargement of sympathies' by way of serious fiction" (23). Of course, the text which has this effect, that of expanding the horizon of the reader (in a way the writer may not have intended), need not be 'serious', or even fictitious; it might be a newspaper, or a Will, or a magazine article; we have seen already the effect that any of these may have on a reader. Oates carries this assumption on: that the writer "experiences a[n]...enlargement of vision", similar to that assumed for the reader, depends on the writer's being "immersed in her art and not subjected to other's assessments of it, and of her" (23) (presumably at least until the work is finished). She also feels that writing is "directed, ideally toward the future", a view that Edwina, that would-be shaper of future generations, would completely concur with! Enumerating some of the difficulties of the writer who is also a woman in a world where the term '(man) writer' is never heard, she says: "The composing of fiction is not antithetical to 'experience' and certainly not an escape from experience; it *is* experience" (24). In the terms of this study, it is an experience that might facilitate perception and might show the way in, through, or out of a secret passage.

If writing is experience, and the self that writes is constructed according to its past experience, then it is no wonder that Edwina's past leads her to write as she does. Her prose could be compared to the psyche of a woman who has had violence done to her; she has removed herself so far from her feelings and from her body that she can produce only a raped text, and symptoms which mimic illness. She has learnt that real feelings of passion lead to fear, pain, and humiliation.

The Narrator, on the other hand, is a spinster who has resisted assimilation, and her ambivalence constantly allows for subversive readings. As Bender puts it,

...she emphasises such contradiction [talking-against]: beneath the embroidery, she shows a darker ground, a pattern of sexual repression and social conformity. Counterpointing her advocacy of proper conduct and conventional wisdom there are signs of some irremediable disorder...the Narrator herself expresses frustration at the indecipherability of experience, and the resulting impossibility of narrative closure (138).

The Narrator, then, can and does use her writing to negotiate her secret passage in a way that Edwina cannot. Edwina has made herself at home in her blind tunnel, and she will leave it only after her death, when her past is revealed. While the Narrator does not directly reveal whether her own life was greatly changed by the writing of what was intended to be the definitive biography of John Quincy Zinn, but turned out to be much more, it is possible to chart great waves of uncertainty, increasing in frequency as the story unfolds, across her work. From her confident start as "the authorised chronicler of the Zinn family" (3), her final offering is a measure of her final state of mind. It is a poem by Longfellow concerning the afterlife that she may have formerly read as "a gladsome *certitude*", but is now forced to confront as possibly "a *riddle*" (615). There is the feeling that she is now in her secret passage, and it is possible that, like

her models in Christian womanhood, Edwina and Sarah, she may never emerge.

As we have seen above, intimate female friendship is often so feared as a subversive force in a patriarchal society that it is allied with witchcraft. Where women can learn to trust each other enough to share important parts of their secret lives, including how they are limited by objectification, and where the entrances to secret passages for escape may be located, there is also the possibility of their sub-versions becoming widely diffused in society and accepted (or, as in our society, at least tolerated) as alternative realities. Ideally, presumably, this kind of intelligence might be passed from mother to daughter.

We have already seen how shallow the relationships between generations of women are for the women of Bloodsmoor. Indeed, for women in almost all Oates's writing, female friendship or deep mother/daughter relationships are virtually unknown, however in *Solstice*, Oates does present us with a close relationship between two women, Monica and Sheila. Although neither of these women are lesbians (because there is no doubt either would continue to give her primary commitment to a man if the opportunity offered itself), their relationship is a lesbian one, because within it, their primary commitment is to each other, according to Adrienne Rich's theory of the Lesbian Continuum.

However, this is not a relationship which is helpful to either woman. It is obsessive and oppressive. Each woman is using the other to escape, but neither is really capable of being a rescuer. Each wishes the other to depend on her, but neither is truly able to be independent. They make

each other ill in turn, and the ending, with Monica being taken, near death, to hospital, becomes just another episode in an endless saga of emotional and physical crises.

Although Faderman (1981) and Smith-Rosenberg (1975) state that 'romantic friendship' was a potent force in the lives of middle-class Victorian women in America, there is little true female intimacy in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*. Only in the relationship between "Philippe Fox" and her beloved Delphine does Oates present the possibility of a happy, mutually-desired female intimacy – but women like "Philippe" (and, by implication, Delphine) are "unnatural". For the "normal" women in Oates's novels, then, female friendship is shallow and of no use in their escape attempts. Neither woman friends nor their mothers will be able to help them find the secret passage out of their situation.

It may be that Oates wishes to portray loneliness as an inescapable part of being human. The antidote to the desperate isolation experienced by many of her female characters might be female friendship, as relationships between women and men are generally, as we have seen, not very fulfilling for women in Oates's novels. In two of her more recent novels, however, there is a sign that she might now be seeing female friendship as usefully able to subvert the generally negative messages her female characters live by. Marya, the protagonist of *Marya: A Life*, finds that until she begins to trust another woman (her aunt Vera), she is not able to begin the search for her mother, who had abandoned her as a small child, and the girls in *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993) support and assist each other's difficult passage through adolescence – but are, ultimately, not able to save each other.

It is clear that any sub-versions which the Zinn daughters might develop will owe nothing to their mother. Upon becoming a mother, Prudence, in her newly dependent position vis-a-vis her parents, seems to have lost all her former spunk. However, it is tempting to suggest that the spark of rebellion may have been only smouldering, as one after another her daughters, and finally herself, reject utterly the 'place' that society has prepared for them.

Prudence's own mother, Sarah, is in no position to pass anything on to her daughter. Her reaction to having become a mother seems to have been to withdraw into sterile sainthood in the deepest recesses of her secret passage. Edwina, similarly, has not allowed motherhood to draw her out of her secret passage; her treatment at the hands of Elisha Burlinghame has in fact driven her deeper away from human relationships, unlike her niece Octavia, whose ritualised humiliation eventually drives her to act to save herself.

But Octavia's passage differs from those of her female relations only in degree. All the women of Bloodsmoor find and use their own secret passage to reach a form of independence from male objectification. By continually undercutting the Narrator's over-romanticised views of love and marriage with images of lust and/or pain, Oates reveals how her female characters come to perceive the realities of the intimate relationships they have with men. Although critics have often misunderstood Oates as portraying women as dependent and vacillating, it is from their own needs and by their own actions that her characters come to an understanding of themselves. The motivating force may be loneliness or lust, and the narrator may choose to see it as perversity or love, but the result is that the women of Bloodsmoor

are driven to escape by their refusal to be confined alone, and in silence.

Chapter Four:

The attempts that characters make to escape their objectification

After perceiving their confinement, characters must make a choice to leave the passage. The need to escape must be great – using one's secret passage is a risky affair; it is not always possible to see 'the light at the end of the tunnel', and, having seen it, it may be tempting to stay in the security of the dark. Stasis is at least familiar, and may bring rewards; while Prudence is building up monumental resentments as a wife and mother she has a social position and widespread admiration for her pivotal position between 'saintly' Sarah and Edwina and her bevy of marriagable daughters. If Constance Philippa had been able to submit to the Baron she would have had considerable power in her social position. There must, therefore, be a strong degree of compulsion in the form of misery in the character's present situation. We have seen how characters are limited and confined, how they came to realise their position, and how their frustrations propelled them toward an uncertain future by way of an unknown path. Their actual escape attempts may be dramatic or subtle, may involve physical leaving or only mental readjustment, but all have the effect of removing a character from the situation she finds intolerable – to another, which may not be a better one but is freely chosen.

Although Oates has attracted feminist ire for her portrayal of women using men as tools in their escape attempts, men are probably the most traditional tool used by fictional characters in escape attempts, often in return for sexual favours, either within or without marriage. This method is often romanticised and elevated to the status of elopement, as it is by the Narrator in the case of Samantha. In her first escape, Malvinia uses Orlando; having later escaped from him she lives partly by her acting, but subsidised by a succession of male patrons. Her position as a commodity in the sexual economy is forcibly brought home to her as the result of an accidental meeting with Cheyney du Pont, but she is, for all her horror at her own sexuality, a commodity which is wholly owned and operated by herself, unlike Samantha who is still owned and would be operated by her Grandfather. By way of another contrast, Constance Philippa opts out of the male-operated sexual economy altogether; taking Catherine Porter's translation of the title of Irigary's essay, she and Delphine, as lesbians, become "Commodities Among Themselves."

Prudence actively pursues John Quincy Zinn to escape from her spinster status, even competing with her friend Parthenope Brownrigg to win him. However, while Prudence may once have thought that marriage would free her from her anomalous position as spinster, it in fact brings her to the position of beggar, even more dependent on her parents than she had been as a single woman, and she will need to escape again. Without economic independence, she will always be confined by others' expectations.

Deirdre, on the other hand, is not to be deflected from her course by the hint of romance. Although she seems to be at the mercy of her spirits, there is no doubt that her career, and its income, has brought her freedom

from the limits imposed on most women of her class, even in the way she dresses, and this is nowhere better demonstrated than in the exchange between herself and Dr Stoughton (474–5). He sees her independent life as "a most *piteous* fate"; she asks what fate is "*not* piteous". His reply sums up the essence of what he, and the Narrator, along with most of the nineteenth century, sees as true womanhood:

The joyous fulfilment of your sex: the sacred duties of beloved wife, and helpmeet, and mother. In opposition to the vulgar and mercantile hurly-burly of the great world, the idyllic pleasures of the domestic hearth —the which... provide us with that small measure of bliss, which is...Our Lord's promise to us, of the Heaven to come.

Deirdre's response is withering, but, the Narrator approvingly reports, dignified. Having disparaged the link he has made between God and woman's place, she goes on:

I am deeply grateful for your suggestion, Dr Stoughton, uttered out of that special reservoir of wisdom that is yours, both as a consequence of your profession in life, and your maleness: but you will forgive me, if I demur, in that I much prefer intercourse with the spirits.

This speech shows her distance from Bloodsmoor and Edwina's influence; the Narrator prefaces it with the disclaimer "it bespeaks a sensibility formed neither by that devout Christian couple Mr and Mrs Bonner, nor by the Zinns, and is, indeed, a libel upon her Bloodsmoor background itself!" Deirdre, like Malvinia, is her own mistress, and is not to be bought by empty rhetoric and returned to a container too small for her talents.

Although they may become romantically involved with men, the women of Bloodsmoor resist using male financial patronage in their escape attempts. Malvinia depends on Orlando completely at the outset, but soon becomes independent of him. Deirdre earns and loses a fortune by her own efforts in her escape from Bloodsmoor, but both she and Malvinia are eventually reduced to supporting themselves in a small way. It is only through

inheritance that Deirdre, and her sisters and Prudence, are eventually able to be truly independent. In a society in which women's work is either taken for granted or underpaid, and where inheritance is normally presumed to pass through the male line, being the beneficiary of a man's Will remains the only way women can gain the power and freedom that control of property and/or capital can bring.

By becoming the "inheritrix of...incalculable wealth" (576), Deirdre, for the first time in the position of benefactor, has suddenly become beautiful, according to the Narrator, much as she tells us Samantha did when she and Nahum fell in love. Deirdre's gesture of giving each of her relatives an equal share in her fortune is generous, according to the Narrator, but, of course, it will not actually cost her anything, as the sums involved are so vast as to make division insignificant.

It is this money which enables Prudence to escape to join her old friend Parthenope Brownrigg, and it is her family's money that has enabled Parthenope to establish a reputation as a writer. Like Edwina, Parthenope's independent income and reputation as a writer have freed her from the expectations that might have limited her daily life, but, unlike Edwina, her speaking in her own voice has prevented her work being recognised by the establishment. By middle age she has been able to create enough of a life for herself that Prudence is able to escape to join her in the cause of dress reform. Despite her earlier condemnation of Parthenope's work as "a very sickly sort of poetry" (90), Prudence is now, in middle age, able to find something to admire in her old friend. It seems that her standards have changed, and an idea she once espoused, the idea that women might be able to stand beside men, or even stand alone without men, has again

become an inspiration for her.

"A very sickly sort of Poetry" was Prudence's judgement as a woman strongly influenced by canonical standards in literature – a teacher and amateur philosopher. Without wishing to get into the argument about whether women write differently from men as a group – a proposition that Oates herself very strongly disagrees with – I would rather discuss the basis on which women writers are judged. In the title essay in her book *(Woman) Writer*, Oates claims that women writers are automatically devalued by male critics, on the basis that:

- They write differently
- They can't write (as well)
- What they write about is unimportant
- Only other women would want to read them
- Even if they do write well, who would want to sleep with any of them?

The point that Oates wants to make is that writing by women is, in itself, neither better nor worse than writing by men, neither more nor less true; that standards of judgement based on the sex, race or age of a writer should be constantly critiqued. Oates cites Bloom as one of the "homosocial" critics;¹⁰ a book of Oates criticism he has edited, which is heavily male-dominated (9 male critics and three female), was published in 1987. It virtually ignores everything Oates wrote in the 1980s, including *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, *Solstice* and *Marya: A Life*, except for the final entry,

¹⁰ "Literary scholarship and history, as practised by homosocial critics like Kazin, Davenport, Bloom, and numberless others, makes no effort to preserve [the (woman) writer]. For she does not finally belong to the 'family' of Man." *(W)W*, 31.

which is a short overview of recent fiction and some personal background on Oates by Elaine Showalter, entitled "Joyce Carol Oates: A Portrait". Under its original title "My Friend, Joyce Carol Oates", it was first published in *Ms.* magazine, and never intended as serious academic criticism. The influence of Bloom's anxiety about writers who are not men is clear in this subtle undermining of female critics and in his ignoring of Oates's recent, more overtly feminist, work.

Given, then, that control of language, that is of meaning and the power of its use, has traditionally been ascribed to men, there is a growing body of work on the sub-versions of life that women have always presented to each other. The use of verbal, print, and now electronic media by women has not always been in accordance with what men would prefer, but the suppression of women's sub-versions has never been quite complete (or it would not be possible to be referring to them here). Virtual elimination of women's work from any canon has not meant its complete disappearance.

However, usage of mass forms of media by women has generally been allowed only as long as male-dominated criteria have not been breached – as Ardis in *Do With Me What You Will* demonstrates in her handling of 'radical' guests on her television talk show. As a 'women's show', the debate must always be kept at a shallow level, not undermining any ramparts of patriarchy, or querying any aspects of the economic relationship between men and women.

Similarly, the Narrator of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is intending to serve the male value system and subsequent objectification of women in her writing, but her own doubts keep intruding, more painfully as the work proceeds,

and Oates's use of this ambivalence in her character by the unrelenting parodic undercutting of her voice is the essence of the wonderful irony and humour of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*.

Elaine Teper Bender refers to the performance of the Narrator as "the major romance of Bloodsmoor" (133), and certainly she must remain one of Oates's most fascinating creations. She is 'authorised' to write the biography of John Quincy Zinn, and she frequently bewails the "face of evil" (191) that she must confront in her efforts. There is a constant tension between her 'unwomanliness' in undertaking the 'male' act of writing (especially about such unsavoury subjects as elopement, sexual insatiability, bondage, and female-male transvestitism), and her determination to use her story to escape the constrictions of spinsterhood – to become part of America's "divine Mission" to "finally lead to the regeneration of the world", as she admiringly quotes from the ambitions of Senator Beveridge from Indiana (376).¹¹

The narrative techniques she uses to distance herself from her material reflect this tension. As Bender points out (145), she

...seems most in character when she is feigning ignorance and resisting the demands of fact: *I am ignorant of all detail and wish to remain so*. This apparent modesty gives her the license to supply fictions of her own making, altering the contours of the world she finds offensive: "For is not the artist...obliged to serve the higher moral truths, in his or her craft? Is he not obliged to better the world, and not merely transcribe it?" (BR, 581).

As early as page 39, the Narrator denies that she is influencing events by faithfully recording them; as late as the beginning of the last chapter she

¹¹ A real-life senator, who was in the senate by 1900 (the Narrator is writing after this), Beveridge was a "Progressive" and an outspoken imperialist.

is explaining that she must sacrifice detail in order to give the proper shape to the "*contour*" (520) of the story.

Bender traces the development of the Narrator, and her growing confusion, as the story unfolds: "Once an accomplice of Aunt Edwina, confident in her perception of the moral contours of the universe, the virtues of Victorian hearth and home, the heroism of the self-reliant genius, her eye for detail has given her a view of human evil too close for comfort" (143). Having confessed that she has allowed herself to indulge in "*moral interpretation*" (520), she excuses herself with some detailed philosophising as to the role of narration in general, and of a female narrator especially, and of this narrator in particular. Interpretation is her moral duty, and she does not, thereby, betray the confidence placed in her by the Zinns as the authorised biographer of their father, to "extract what is *exemplary*, rather than that which is merely *idiosyncratic*, and *eccentric*...in order that a wholesome moral lesson may be drawn" (449).

Edwina's use of writing to protect herself from being classified as sexually uncontrollable and a bad mother is a particularly dangerous one. Forced into a marriage by her passionate "fall", and just as quickly widowed with a baby, she abandons her daughter and becomes, in Bender's terms, "a celebrity...one of those immensely popular woman writers who perpetuated the cult of true womanhood" (142). Bender goes on: "Her very rhetoric marks her as an accessory to a system aimed at trivialising female pursuits by absurd exaggeration." The cost to her psyche, as well as to her daughter Deirdre's, is high; she is a hopeless hypochondriac, unhappy, and feared rather than loved by her family.

The dangers of the kind of writing that Edwina literally indulges in are displayed to perfection in the fates of her nieces and daughter. The haunting sight of Constance Philippa, and later Octavia, searching desperately among the books their aunt has written for "some hint as to the nature of the marriage relation" (144) – in vain; Malvinia's horror at her discovery of her own sexual nature; the terror of Octavia's bed-time experiences with Mr Rumford; the necessity for Samantha and Nahum to elope; and, of course, the haunting of Deirdre by her father throughout her childhood, can all be laid at her door. The power she does wield, that of the future disposal of her immense fortune, is used to its fullest extent; she keeps Prudence, and through her all the Zinn girls, at her beck and call.

Edwina herself, interestingly, takes part in none of the rituals that she herself deems essential for women, being, in Bender's terms "[u]naware of the gulf between lady and woman, [and] infatuated with the rhetoric of repression" (142). Her illnesses, her fame and her independent income allow her the eccentricity necessary to escape from them, while still deeming them necessary for others.

Deirdre's first escape, from the unhappiness and loneliness of her upbringing, is achieved by her career as a medium. Although she does not write, her voice and body are the means of her communication – or rather, the medium of other's communication through her. In this, she is like the writer who uses her body to interpret and transmit the messages of her brain – partly, at least, synthesised from other's communications received in the past. In "Five prefaces" (*Woman Writer*), Oates has said that Deirdre of the Spirits represents herself in some way; the 'seer' is always

only one step from her sister the writer, who actually concretises the vision and gives it form and permanence.

Bender says that "Deirdre's history...demonstrates again and again the perversity of a masculine drive to deriddle and debunk spiritual phenomena" (138). Deirdre's examination by the Society for Psychical Research is also somewhat akin to the examination of a writer's work by critics – although the death of the critic in the act of criticising the writer, while it might sometimes be desired, is rarely achieved! Deirdre's spirits, which exist outside the social system she must live in, have no interest in pleasing the gentlemen of the Society, or in abiding by social mores. They are as words on the page, existing as neutral objects until given meaning by interpretation. Deirdre herself is submitting to the examination because she wishes to; she is quite confident in the reality of her experience, and stubbornly unmoved by Helena's passionate attempts to deter her, telling Helena "It is the spirits' wish" that she submit (302). The tension between the two over this matter is a power struggle: if Deirdre is accepted she will have escaped from Helena's influence and will have emerged to perform/practice in her own right.

The question of whether Deirdre is a genuine medium or a clever charlatan will be discussed below, but for now, it is clear that the Narrator believes in her. Her voices have haunted her from childhood. Her father, Captain Burlingame, reaches from the grave in an attempt to make her life as miserable as he made her mother's, but it is to John Quincy Zinn that her desire for protection is directed over and over, and on Malvinia, her would-be 'remaker', that her fear and hatred focus:

O Father please hear how my cruel sisters despise me O Father do not turn away do not deny me O hear how my cruel sisters

despise me O Father please do not turn away do not deny me O hear how Malvinia drew from out her bodice a tiny silver scissors and with it snipped at my breast and pierced my cringing flesh and lifted the skin away and touched my heart my living heart O Father hear how she broke off a piece of my heart and ate it and Ah! this is bitter she spat how bitter! she mocked and jeered How bitter it is, her heart!—her heart! (485).

Again, when Deirdre and Madam Blavatsky are discussing Deirdre's investigation by the Society, "a faint silvery voice sounded, from out of the most shadowed corner of the parlour..." (341). The voice whispers a refrain familiar to Deirdre, "*How bitter it is, your heart!—your heart!*" (302). Says the Narrator "And so indeed it was; and continued to be; until the very day of her downfall." It is as typical of the Narrator to see Deirdre's escape into madness in terms of a downfall, as it is that she reports her as saying, when dispensing her largesse after Edwina's death, that she wishes her family to forgive her for having in the past "too energetically seized upon some small provocation...to feed my bitter heart" (576). This is part of her reconstruction by the Narrator as a 'good woman', and may be no more accurate than the description of Constance Philippa's physical changes.

The Narrator almost consciously reconstructs Deirdre, and repeats the charade with Samantha, who suddenly becomes beautiful when she falls in love with Nahum, and, of course, with Constance Philippa when she returns as Philippe Fox. She seems to be almost uncertain of the concept of a fixed self; if a character is unhappy with the person she is, she might pretend to be, or change into, someone else. While we expect the Narrator to see life from a nineteenth-century essentialist position, Oates is aware that the late twentieth century views self-presentation as a constant process of responsive reconstruction amid continually shifting influences. Her characters frequently display self-reflexion, and her non-fiction prose also shows elements of this self-awareness. An excellent example is in "Budapest

Journal", an essay in *(Woman) Writer*, where Joyce Carol Oates, visiting Budapest, is conscious of behaving "perfectly normally, impersonating the American writer 'Joyce Carol Oates'" (333). In "Pseudonymous Selves", in the same collection, she discusses the problem of the persona of the writer, pseudonyms, anonymity, and critical constructions placed on writers, remarking that

The more successful the writer, the more secure his [sic] 'international reputation,' the greater the temptation to consider oneself in the third person....Who, having created an identity in the world's eyes, an indestructible *persona*, has not subsequently wished to escape from it! – for such is the perversity, the instinct for freedom, in the human psyche (387).

This is an interesting insight into the dilemma of 'the famous writer'; escaping into the writing of a new creation merely reinforces the stereotype of 'the famous writer'; escaping into a pseudonym, she reports with examples from literary history, risks the ire of public and industry alike. If 'the famous writer's' style becomes a part of that writer's persona in the public mind, we can better understand the irritation of the critic¹² who could not locate Oates's 'narrative voice' – and blamed her for his not being able to find it!

Aunt Edwina's narrative voice, being a defence against her real feelings, as we have already seen, is not to be trusted. Her disguise as a spinster is a conscious cloak over her 'real self' – disappointed bride and unfulfilled mother – and her work is, correspondingly, a sham, as it attempts to be a bulwark against change. The Narrator, on the other hand, is, albeit dimly, aware that change is inevitable in life, in individuals and in society, and

¹² In this case Dean Flower, in an article called "Fables of Identity", reviewing some recently published books including *Marya: A Life* in *The Hudson Review*. He considers Oates, interestingly from the point of view of this study, as "a writer struggling violently to escape and create herself in words" (my emphasis).

reflects this in her own writing, which she sees as impacting on the community it purports to represent, and not necessarily in the most felicitous way.

However, this vision is still a long way from the modern, fluid, shifting self, as evidenced by her opinion that Malvinia is not an actress, but only acting like an actress. Since Derrida danced across our philosophical landscape, we must ask how it is possible to part the acting from the act? We are all, constantly, acting 'as if' we had a relatively fixed, stable self, whether or not we believe that this is a pretence; a necessary pretence, but only that.

The complexities that Oates introduces by creating a Narrator with only the consciousness of her time are most cleverly exploited in the character of Octavia. The Narrator sees her as a saintly, loving 'Angel in the Home'; Oates reveals her to us as an ordinary woman, finally hardened and maddened enough by her treatment at the hands of her husband to cold-bloodedly murder him, and, later, to murder her equally vicious son and, incidentally, to thus inherit her late husband's wealth. Right from the earliest pages we see Octavia using the traits that are designated most "womanly" to gain approval, and she continues this throughout her life. The clues are liberally sprinkled by Oates; for example, the verse of J. Monckton Milne¹³ that Octavia recites inwardly during the horrors of the *unitary act* ("Thou must endure..."), advises that she must be "to no possible depth of evil blind" (425), and assures her that she "shalt not work alone", that "God's heart and mind are ever with his own." This

¹³ Of whom, incidentally, there is no trace. Presumably he is one of Oates's 'creations' or a very minor poet.

could certainly read like divine assurance that she, who has never willingly hurt anyone, might be forgiven for taking revenge to escape. However, murder, even in these circumstances, is surely a crime against humanity, and one of the major ironies of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is the Narrator's continual exaltation and sanctification of Octavia, while her sisters, whose crimes are only ever against society, are vilified and rejected until they begin to live within 'respectable' bounds again.

Even Samantha, the most honest and apparently uncomplicated of the Zinn sisters, is not above a little dissembling to effect her escape. Faced with the necessity of marrying the appalling Cheyney, and in love with Nahum, she murmurs to her mother, "faltering, 'I had hoped not to marry at all, but to remain here at home, with you, and dearest father, and continue as I have been: your daughter Samantha, and Father's most trusted associate. I had hoped...to remain a maiden, all the days of my life.'" This ploy covers the horror that Samantha now feels at the thought of remaining at Bloodsmoor, and her inevitable future as the wife of Cheyney. She also sees clearly that the only ties and obligations Nahum is under are those of custom, that neither John Quincy or Prudence have any power over him. Her discovery of the removal of her birthmark, coupled with her realisation that her father's genius is leading him into paths that she does not wish to follow and that her mother has defected to become an agent of Grandfather Kiddemaster, free her from her daughterly obligations. With Nahum she will be free to live, love and invent for herself – albeit constantly restrained by poverty.

Beyond the dissembling of Samantha and the double life of Octavia are the conscious disguises adopted as escape tactics by their sisters, of which

Constance Philippa is the most dramatic example – she could be said to have been in disguise as a lady before she ran away, and as a man afterwards. Her appearance at the beginning of the novel should alert us: tall; "Grecian" of feature; "a surprisingly narrow, and angular physical self"; long sinewy limbs; and a "hard" and "regal" profile, which gave her at times "a somewhat predatory air" (34). For her voice to sound "melodious" it was necessary for her to make an effort; naturally, it emerged "low, and graceless, and dry, and droll". In one of the book's little ironies, this natural voice stirs "some apprehension in her sisters...as to whether...*it was always Constance Philippa who spoke!*—and not, upon occasion, a stranger" (34).

Bender explains the symbolism of the dressmaker's dummies in the attic as "the anaesthetic effect of Victorian convention— the transformation of healthy girls into hollow women" (141). This fits well with Constance Philippa's fascination with her dummy, with the 'correctly shaped', padded 'self' it represents, and her feeling of "doubleness" and fear of the future, discussed with Malvinia (149). It makes doubly poignant her leaving of the dummy in the nuptial bed for the Baron to deflower.

Having cast off convention with her corset, Constance Philippa is free to pursue life and her own sexuality. Faderman, in *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, discusses the medical and social implications of a woman's love for another woman in the nineteenth century, and shows that, although masculine appearance and behaviour may not indicate that a woman is a lesbian, nor feminine appearance and behaviour that she is not, "inappropriate gender behaviour" and "inappropriate sexual object choice" were often confused, and still are today, "in the popular imagination" (43).

Constance Philippa originally dressed as a man for comfort, for safety, and to her great economic advantage. It is clear to us, if not to the Narrator, that, having left her family, her choices may well have been between cross-dressing and prostitution. Faderman points out that if women

moved to an area where they were not known, cut their hair, and wore men's clothes, their potential in terms of meaningful adventure and finances would increase tremendously. They often saw themselves...as women in masquerade, trying to get more freedom and decent wages (42).

She lists the "privileges" that a 'passing woman' would have over her sisters as being able to "open a bank account, write checks, own property, go anywhere unaccompanied, vote in elections." She also points out that disguising oneself as a man was much more common among working-class women; the economic advantages they had to gain were far greater than for a middle-class woman like Constance Philippa, who could expect to be looked after by her husband or family. Working class woman could transmute reasonably well to working class man; Constance Philippa transmutes into a classless man, an urbane nomad who will turn his hand to anything, including, if necessary, a little gunslinging for his own protection.

There are clues to Constance Philippa's impatience with the restrictions of female life at Bloodsmoor as early as page 7, where her wish to walk "*alone*" is reported by the Narrator as something which "frequently dismayed the elder ladies". Faderman states that problems with detection would have been few, as "women never wore pants. A person in pants would have been assumed to be male" (42), and Constance Philippa's disguise is so successful that Malvinia, visited by a handsome and vaguely familiar young man after a performance, does not know her own sister, and is only confused when she looks at the bouquet handed her, of "wilted tea roses, and weed flowers distinguished by their ugly pallor: *turkey beard*,

fly poison, miterwort, and death camas!" (294). It is not recorded whether she, at this moment, remembers the mock wedding bouquet, of identical composition, she herself had once given Constance Philippa (171); does she then see through her sister's disguise? The text does not reveal this; given Malvinia's very heterosexual blinkers, and her reaction to Philippe Fox's appearance for the reading of the Will, it seems unlikely.

Constance Philippa's first dramatic (and hilarious) escape, leaving the symbol of her physical appearance as a culturally feminine woman in the bed in her place, marks her exit from her secret passage, symbolised, as we have seen, by her removal of her corset, and the words "I shall never be *that person* again" (589). This is followed by her physical journey and her gradual change of appearance into a masculine one. After her return to Bloodmoor in her new persona, she undertakes a dramatic rescue and a second physical escape, this time in the role of saviour of her childhood sweetheart Delphine, who has been imprisoned by her wicked husband.

The actual process of Constance Philippa's metamorphosis, like Deirdre's escape, is another process never fully revealed by Oates. The version given by the Narrator, coloured by her own prejudices concerning masculinity and femininity and her ignorance concerning biological possibilities, are as close as we are going to get to what actually happened. It is clear that Constance Philippa sees her escape, eventually, in terms of a masculine "over the wall" departure, rather than a blinking emergence from a secret passage; she is reported as boasting of "o'ercoming Constance Philippa" (591) in her transformation to Philippe Fox. All the physical changes that the Narrator describes on page 596, except the development of the imaginary penis, are slightly exaggerated examples of characteristics that

Constance Philippa had in the first place and which would have developed over the years, with physical labour and her adoption of more open, 'masculine' body language: the deep voice, the very small breasts lost in muscle, the muscular limbs, and the long-legged walk.

The appearance of Constance Philippa disguised as a man at the reading of Edwina's will presents the Zinns, and their friends and relations, with an impossible dilemma. The obvious solution – that Basil simply "ask this personage if, in fact, *he was Constance Philippa in disguise as a man*" – is ruled out by Basil's "gentility, and [his]...highly developed...sense of what might, and what might not, be spoken aloud, in a company mixed of gentlemen and ladies" (552). The range of reactions to Constance Philippa's appearance, through anger, confusion, and uncaring acceptance, are all subsumed by Samantha's simple good manners, which allow the awkward moment, with its hint of possible violence, to pass. There is a definite and rather sinuously attractive sense of power in the person of Philippe Fox – Samantha feels it as "a certain fixedness of notion, and a very real, if latent, ferocity" (554). This has an interesting connection to the rather sinister, menacing air of Constance Philippa's erstwhile fiancé the Baron, whom Constance Philippa had envied, and whom Philippe Fox now seems to emulate. Philippe Fox carries a gun, and has the air of constantly being about to use it – a further indication that 'he' cannot be Constance Philippa, as only a masculine person could be capable of murder in the gently ordered world of Bloodsmoor. Women nurture, men kill – and here we can discern Oates's gentle ironical dig at some of the more excessive theorists of a feminism that exalts women as being inherently 'better' than men, a 'modern' view that has its roots in the 'Angel in the Home' of the nineteenth-century, and that Naomi Wolf has recently identified as being

symptomatic of what she calls "Victim Feminism" (Wolf 1993). Oates has no illusions about the capacity of women for violent behaviour, or about our society's horror at the thought of the female murderer.

Most interesting, perhaps, are the reactions of the Zinn parents – the horror of John Quincy, as he is one who has paid no attention to social mores (in fact, has always resisted them), and who, presumably, has always wanted a son; and the exactly contrary reaction from his wife, who presents the assembled company with a simple solution to the dilemma.

Where Constance Philippa's dress, on the fateful day of Deirdre's abduction, had been "handsome", Deirdre's was "made over from a costume of Malvinia's, and very charming indeed" (19). This tiny detail is another example of the complexity of Oates's vision; "costume" prefigures Malvinia's escape to the stage, and Deirdre's use of another's garment indicates her future of a medium of others' messages, as clearly as "handsome" prefigures Constance Philippa's future.

Malvinia's physical escape being discovered by the elder Zinns, the Narrator reports their "anguish", but also reports Mr Zinn's reaction as being to "recite in a voice of bell-like clarity for his weeping family to ponder" a "poem by the great Mr Emerson" on the subject of "Illusion", in which Illusion is personified as a female, and the deceived is a "man who thirsts" (177). Malvinia would be unconcerned by these sentiments; having escaped "under the protection of Orlando Vandenhoffen" (234), she begins her career of professional acting – and not the least of her parts is that of "Malvinia Morloch", actress, temptress and, latterly, unhappy seductress. It is ironic that Malvinia, terrified of the expression of her sexuality, should

have chosen a lifestyle in which she becomes dependent on male patronage.

Malvinia's acting and entertaining talents have been remarked on by the Narrator from early in her story – not always with approval. She often refers to them in terms such as "imitation and mimicry". Her talent is not always appreciated by her family either; her mother, in exasperation, refers to her as a "changeling" after one particularly "audacious" attempt at entertainment, which involved an ancient whalebone corset of her grandmother and Pip the monkey dressed in a sailor suit (232). However, considering the occupation of her paternal grandfather involved living on his wits and pleasing a large and fickle public in peril of his life, perhaps her talents, and the success which Constance Philippa enjoys in her similarly knife-edge lifestyle, are not so surprising. Malvinia, like Octavia, learns very early that the secret of success is to give men the answers they want to hear. It is perhaps relevant, too, that Malvinia's favourite New York store has "arisen out of a pedlar's shabby backpack" (289) – if her grandfather Zinn had survived she might have been the heir to just such a store herself – or did he?

When Malvinia does achieve fame as Malvinia Morloch, the Narrator reports that "she had only to sift through her growing stack of notices, and reread the letters of fulsome praise and adoration she received daily, and tear open the wrappings of yet another luxurious gift, to placate herself, and forget who she was" (284, my emphasis). Or does she mean "remember who she is"? The Narrator gives Malvinia no credit for her ascendancy, preferring to believe that it is Orlando that has created Malvinia Morloch, and that, without him, she could return to being Miss Malvinia Zinn, as if nothing has happened. Malvinia has no illusions about the role of

entertainment in life, referring to Spiritualists as "'our competitors in the theatre;...but actors and actresses, pretending otherwise'" (291). However, the presence of Deirdre in a box at her performance one evening reveals to us that Malvinia knows quite well who Deirdre really is, but also shows the Narrator's opinion of Malvinia's acting abilities to be unduly harsh; she is professional enough not to let her agitation show.

This professionalism extends to her private life, where she plays the role of "violated virgin" to a succession of admirers – this at least the Narrator approves of (443). It is not entirely an act; she is terrified of the unleashed force of her passions, and uses her "nymphal resistance" (443) to protect herself from arousal as much as to attract male attention. However, over time, "certain inclinations" having been "aroused in the young woman" (448), her passion becomes uncontrollable, and terrifying, not only to her, but to her sexual partners. Eventually, the violence of her response having driven away lovers as desirable as Mark Twain, she becomes haunted by "that hideous imprecation, 'The Beast! The Beast!'" (467), according to the Narrator, and must physically flee from the stage and the theatrical life, where her waning beauty is in any case beginning to condemn her to fewer and less important roles, to yet another life as a retiring teacher of elocution. Her flight is accompanied by many rumours, like those that attended her sisters' disappearances, so that, eventually, it seems impossible for any one to find out why she left, where she left for, and even if she is still alive.

Oates uses disguise in Deirdre's escapes in a more subtle way, with strong echoes of Hawthorne's *A Blythedale Romance*, especially the veiled woman motif. Her identity as Deirdre Zinn disguises her identity as Deirdre

Bonner, which covers her birth as Deirdre Burlinghame, and she later becomes "Deirdre of the Shadows", who has no past at all, and who, even when she is recognised by her former family, is not claimed by them. Her original identity as the daughter of Aunt Edwina is kept a mystery until nearly the end of the story.

The Narrator clearly states (169) that "Deirdre of the Shadows was not Deirdre Louisa Zinn", but we know they do, at least, inhabit the same body. Like Philippe Fox and Malvinia Morloch, Deirdre of the Shadows is at once the same and not the same person as Miss Zinn. Mrs Zinn allows that the medium resembles Deirdre, but is not Deirdre, "but a stranger". As in the case of Constance Philippa, when the medium's appearance is described, some light is cast: it is Deirdre, but cannot be, because Deirdre would never dress like that, as Philippe Fox cannot be Constance Philippa, because she is wearing trousers.

When Prudence and Octavia attend a seance given by "Deirdre of the Shadows", wondering if she is 'their Deirdre', Prudence, "seeing at once the unhappy truth, said simply: 'No. It is not'" (166). (We strongly suspect, and soon know, that it, in fact, is; the "unhappy truth" is that it is Deirdre, and that she is lost to the Zinns.) Oates is playing here with the meaning and interpretation of even the simplest words, as throughout the novel she plays with the slipperiness of language, character and appearance.

Lennox Keyser's reading of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* discusses Deirdre's routing of the medical profession, and this could conceivably include her relationship with Dr Stoughton, as a successful subversion of patriarchal

(scientific and religious) values, using a sub-version of science and religion, spiritualism. In the same way, Oates's subversion of nineteenth-century (and our) mores uses nineteenth-century literary conventions underpinned by feminist insight.

The victory of spiritualism over science represented by the seance which resulted in "[t]wo gentlemen, said to be in excellent health, in the prime of life, staunch Rationalists, *tormented to death by spirits*" (366) is another mystery Oates chooses not to solve. If Deirdre is a charlatan, it is possible to consider that she escaped exposure by committing murder – although exactly how is difficult to imagine. In any event, the killing of the men is seen to give final, incontrovertible proof that Deirdre is a genuine medium, and she is made a member of the Society for Psychical Research, acquiring "an international reputation as a 'seeress,' and...a considerable fortune as well" (468).

Deirdre's final collapse is brought about by her failure to control her spirit voices. No longer a medium for messages, Deirdre becomes the message itself; no longer the interpreter of her voices, she is now the voice. Having neglected her own physical and emotional needs all her life, she must now pay the price and lose control completely. It is not possible for Deirdre to choose escape from her mediumship, as she is pursued by her voices, which have, eventually, brought her "As close to madness as a cobweb has breadth" (481). Madness, allowing her voices to overcome her, is the only way out for her.

Although Deirdre's breakdown may have been serious, it is not a chronic illness. She can, and will, recover, unlike her mother and grandmother.

Although the Narrator considers insanity "a fate easily the equivalent in horror, and in degradation, to the loss of maidenhead itself" (477), she is entirely sympathetic with the chronic, but largely imaginary or self-inflicted, illnesses of Edwina and Sarah Kiddemaster. Her horror of insanity lies in the resultant lack of control; she ties it very closely with Deirdre's habits of "perversity" and "spiteful insistence on going her own way" (477). "You see, girls", she seems to be saying, "what awaits those who disobey and are wilful; their fate will be to *lose control!*"

The ultimate symbol of control, both social and sexual, in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is, as we have seen, the corset. Opposition to the wearing of corsets was one issue that linked both feminists ("dress-reformers") and some doctors in the second half of the nineteenth-century, but strong social pressure for control of the definition of female sexuality, including its proper shape and presentation, ensured that it continued as a symbol of middle-class femininity. It is particularly ironic that it is to dress reform that Prudence is attracted after decades of being corsetted, physically, intellectually and emotionally, by her family, particularly by Edwina's strictures.

Given such rigid confinement of their bodies, and the inability of the larger community to hear or acknowledge subversive expression, it is not surprising that women sought to express their discomfort through the body itself, by starving themselves and/or by becoming hypochondriacs. In *A Bloodsmoor Romance* there are several female characters who have taken the doomed escape route of chronic illness, some of them with fatal consequences.

The Baron von Mainz, who seems to be attracted to Constance Philippa's androgynous appearance, has already buried at least two wives. The first of these, only 15 years of age, had "died in the seventh month of her pregnancy, which had been the seventh month of her marriage as well (an abnormally large fetus had "turned to stone" in her womb, "whilst the rest of her...had withered, a sickly yellow" (160). The suspicion engendered by the "abnormally large fetus" might lead us to wonder if the Baron had not taken advantage of her "childlike innocence" before the marriage was solemnised. The fetus "turning to stone" probably means it had been dead for some time, and had caused its poor mother to die of septicemia. It may have been a full-term baby which was unable to be born due to the early tight-lacing of its mother's pelvis.

His second wife's case is even more interesting; the "fabled English beauty whose slender, sylphlike figure was renowned in London society", and who had had her lower ribs removed "in order to guarantee a satisfactorily slender waist" (an operation which is still performed for the same reason), seems to have starved to death. Upon post-mortem examination, her organs are found to be atrophied, and, like her predecessor, her uterus contains a fetus, in this case, "hardly frog-sized", which has "turned to stone". For her, manipulation of her physical body, which may be an escape from the sexual self or may simply fulfil the demands of fashion, has proved fatal.

Sarah Kiddemaster, on the other hand, seems to have taken up starving as a very successful way to escape the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, without actually dying of malnutrition in the process. Like the Baron's second wife, her autopsy reveals "very few inner organs, and those of a miniature, or atrophied, nature". The Narrator reveals her lack of

anatomical knowledge in her assertion that these "tiny" organs lay in the body cavities "amidst the pools of pale pink watery blood." However, the point is made: Sarah has paid the price for her "much-envied" seventeen inch waist (43) with constant illness caused by a combination of tight-lacing and anorexia. It is a fair assumption that her illnesses – "debilitating but not fatal" (237) – which began after the birth of Prudence and never left her, were an excellent escape from further sexual attention from Judge Kiddemaster and subsequent childbirth. They had the added benefit of constant attention from the whole family and the wider community, and, because of the clear connection made between sexual and other appetites ("she had gradually conquered *appetite* in all its insidious forms" (235)) brought her the reputation of being something of a saint: the forty-three pounds she weighed at the mortuary "the mortician thought most extraordinary, a tribute as much to the lady's ascetic Christian practices of diet, as to her God-given anatomy" (238).

Sarah's conversion to Christian Science is an excellent way for her to continue her role as invalid unmolested. Dr Moffet, as a nineteenth-century physician, and a true man of science, objects – primarily, it seems, on the grounds that he will lose control over her illness. Her falling "into the clutches, in Dr Moffet's heated words" of Christian Scientists prevents him treating her for "a new and hitherto unexplored disease, just beginning to be prevalent [read "to be diagnosed"] in the mid-Atlantic region, known as 'ovarian neuralgia,' in which Dr Moffett had become something of an expert" (235). As 'neuralgia' is a medical term for pain along a nerve¹⁴, and the ovary is not an organ supplied with nerves, it is difficult to see how

¹⁴ The Macquarie Dictionary p1196: "A sharp and paroxysmal pain along the course of a nerve."

ovarian neuralgia might occur; it cannot be the 'ovulation pain' that women commonly report; Sarah's age would rule that out. A partial explanation may be found in Carol Smith-Rosenberg's 1973 article. She writes of the ovaries, and their newly-discovered function as the concrete symbol of women's place being defined by her biology, in terms of their perceived "dictatorship of woman's life" (60) in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their role in reproduction was then only recently understood, and a theory of their pathology had followed quickly on this discovery.

Bender Teper sees the chronic illness in the female characters of *Bloodsmoor* as "the novel's...exposure of gynaecology as a Victorian pathology" (140); she sees the many "women's diseases" the Narrator catalogues as reactions to control using medical diagnosis, as if the women are saying: "So we are not fit to do anything, to become anything, to know anything? We are totally defined by our difference and consequent wrongness? Very well, we shall be totally dependent and feeble; we shall be as you perceive us to be." Even Prudence, that energetic spinster, when she fears her lust for John Quincy Zinn will go unslaked, is in danger of succumbing "to those very 'spells' – lightheadedness, temper, weeping, melancholy, 'fagged nerves' – she so deplored in the females of her acquaintance" (101), and, for a time, falls victim to the 'dosages' of Edwina's nostrums – a path which would almost certainly, sooner or later, have lead to a total lack of control in the blind tunnel of addiction. Deirdre, also, before the exorcism at Fairbanks House – where Mrs Fairbanks, incidentally, suffers a "protracted and undiagnosable illness" (486) – seems in danger of becoming a martyr to migraine attacks (490), caused, in part, by her increasing lack of control over her voices.

Whether Octavia also almost falls victim to "Miss Emmeline's Remedy" we cannot be sure. Her assurance to her mother that she is "already under Dr Moffet's prescription for that very medicine" could be read as a simple, polite way to deflect her mother's anxieties at her daughter's "wild, scattered, unproductive thoughts" – Octavia having just obliquely referred to the likeness that a newspaper photograph of Philippe Fox bears to Constance Philippa (374). However, her many miscarriages are part of a pattern for married women in this novel. Although it was a common experience in the nineteenth century, there might be a slight suspicion attaching to the large number of miscarriages suffered – particularly by Octavia and Prudence, both clearly resourceful women. Abortion was certainly not unknown or unpractised in the nineteenth century.

As in virtually all Oates novels, there is little emphasis given to details of pregnancy and childbirth in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, ostensibly here because the Narrator has no direct experience of these events. It is possibly one of the reasons why critics have had such a difficult time pigeonholing Oates – although she is a woman, she rarely writes about the specifically female experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing that feminism acknowledges and sometimes exalts. In general, women in Oates's novels either have children at the opening of the book, have them with a minimum of fuss and disruption to the novel, or don't have them at all. What Oates does write about, often and clearly, is the way women are treated whether they have children or not, what she has called "the distinctly female fate". She sees that limiting women to a role as wife-and-mother is only one of the ways of controlling female sexuality, and, having no children of her own, may see herself as well-placed to report on some of the more subtle objectifying society uses on both childless women and mothers.

Like her sister-in-law, Sarah, Edwina makes a belated attempt to wrest control of her illnesses away from Dr Moffett, in her case by going on a spa-visiting spree as part of a temporary rejection of conventional medicine, but she is forced to return to his care. His revenge is simple: he diagnoses "'an excessive richness of plasmon in the blood'", and proceeds to bleed her to death. Her original escape from spinsterhood to motherhood was doomed, because it was based on a conventional version of romantic love; her next escape from fallen woman to hypochondriac writer reached a setback with the realisation that she would probably never see her daughter again. Until Deirdre's abduction she had had the best of both worlds: a career, the adulation of her public and the sympathy of her family for her fragile health, no hint of the "fall" that had brought Deirdre into the world, but unlimited access to her daughter and the power to control her life through manipulation of the Zinn family. Her bed-bound regimen after Deirdre's abduction (122) exposes her as the cunning hypochondriac she is; able to eat only the finest, sweetest foods, and to work only when she feels well enough – she is careful to do a minimum of work – she seems to spend most of the time in an opium-induced paranoia regarding her great-nieces. At least the laudanum seems to have kept Sarah quiet; it seems equally to have inflamed Edwina's already dominating and suspicious personality. It is not surprising that one of the spurs to the escapes of her great-nieces is her tyranny, representing as she does the rule of propriety at Bloodmoor. Unlike the Narrator, who, in the course of the novel becomes tormented by doubt, she has never escaped, nor will she ever, the objectifications she has internalised and continues to spread in support of the status quo.

The escape routes that the the women of Bloodmoor use may involve men

or money, but the use to which they have each learned to put language in their discovery of the entrance to their secret passages requires more danger as they travel further toward their new lives. As Deirdre's illness demonstrates, not keeping a distance between oneself and the male medium of language can lead to the break down of the self. Edwina, as we have seen, keeps all emotion well away from her at all times; the results may not help her to reach satisfaction in her life, but she is safe, unlike the Narrator, who has allowed emotion to interfere with her telling of her story, and who seems to be in a very uncertain state of mind by its end. Malvinia protects herself by consciously creating both her medium (acting) and her persona, and is thus able to feel she controls it. As she is conscious of her use of disguise, like Constance Philippa, she probably does have more control over her future than a woman like Sarah, who, in her quest to represent a form of inhuman perfection, seems to be wondering hopelessly lost in a world of her own. Octavia, of course, most openly exploits the gap between what a woman 'should' feel and what she really feels, and acts there to achieve her heart's desire.

Chapter Five: The success or otherwise of the escape attempts and a conclusion

The essence of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* is disruption. Oates gleefully disrupts all expectations of the narrative form: the plot is frustratedly non-linear as story-lines are interrupted by other storylines; real people and events are popped haphazardly into the fictional mix; traces of poems, bits of stream-of-consciousness and odd coincidences link the seemingly unconnected and disparate paths the women of Bloodsmoor take in their odysseys. But most disruptive of all is the ending, which disrupts all our assumptions about Edwina, whose position in the family has been somewhat akin to that of a spider at the centre of a web. After her death, it is revealed that, far from being a spinster, she has experienced sexual passion, been married, and borne Deirdre. She admits, finally, in her post-mortem attempt to continue control of her family, that she threw herself into her work to escape her obligations to her daughter: "thus I deluded myself; & was not, in truth, unhappy" (571). Worse, she encouraged others to fall into the same trap, all the while acting as if she was teaching them how to avoid it. All her vague admonitions would never have been half as useful as a modicum of accurate sex education. Her attempt to escape from the restrictions of spinsterhood having proved abortive, she has dug herself deep into a blind tunnel of

paranoia and hypochondria, from which she wields what power she has mercilessly, keeping Prudence and her daughters at her beck and call. She is a victim of her own sexual passion, but her independent financial status gives her a power denied the other women of Bloodsmoor. Only after death, when the facts of her life are revealed, can she escape her self-chosen role as a spinster, 'expert' in etiquette but never loved. Her sister-in-law Sarah's objectification as sainted martyr is only intensified after her death; for Edwina, the waste of her pathetically failed escape attempt is laid bare for her family to see.

It is conventional romance that causes the downfall of Edwina, and also of Prudence, but it is Prudence's eventual rejection of romance and the obligations it has brought her ("I am free of them...and of *it*!" (604)), that frees her. Her new life will not be peaceful; dress reform was considered a 'crank' cause and its adherents a laughing stock. But her newly re-discovered friendship with Parthenope promises her peace and fulfilment, and her share of Edwina's money gives her the economic freedom to enjoy it.

Constance Philippa originally rejects romance in favour of her quest to live unfettered by femininity, and is rewarded by a love she could not have hoped for as a woman in conventional society. By following her heart against the dictates of society she becomes an untouchable outlaw in the eyes of her society, and incidentally presents the Narrator with an awful dilemma. Not satisfied with a practical, working solution to the mystery of Constance Philippa/Philippe Fox, she must attempt to explain and clarify, and, of course, moralise.

Philippe's elopement with Delphine necessitates that "he" be a "man" – adultery being preferable to "unnaturalness" – so male genitals must be invented by the Narrator and their development accounted for (595) by the ingenious means of the wearing of tight trousers, the keeping of masculine company and the pursuit of masculine activity, the eating of spicy foods and the imbibing of alcohol. Not willing to waste an opportunity, the Narrator uses her theory on this development as a warning to young girls. But even here, in the laying bare of one mystery, another is enfolded. How can the Narrator know 'Philippe Fox' has male genitalia? She cannot; all her descriptions are fictitious. Only Delphine will ever know for sure! Finally, as Philippe Fox, 'husband' of Delphine, Constance Philippa can find love and quest in one.

The search for love and romance has first brought Malvinia to abject humiliation as the victim of her own sexual drives. Her happiness eventually lies in platonic marriage and the companionship of Malcolm Kennicott. It is not possible to say that she has succeeded in escaping the objectification of herself as evil; rather she has chosen to take another path through her secret passage, one which brings her out into the light perhaps not completely free, but having reached a compromise with her nature. She accepts her passion as a part of herself, but has chosen to abjure it and its consequences.

Most of Deirdre's life changes cannot, strictly, be called escapes, as they seem to happen without her volition: her abandonment as an infant, her adoptive parents' deaths and her second adoption, her abduction in the black silk balloon, her illness, her inheritance. Her living as a spiritualist and her return to Bloodsmoor are directly related to her own actions. But

it is possible to argue that she caused her own abduction by calling (the spirit of) her father (see especially the dream-narrative on page 18), from whose powers was created the balloon that rescued her and took her to freedom. Oates never explains the mystery that is constantly around her – where did the balloon come from? how did her interrogators die? In a novel whose Narrator is constantly looking to provide rational explanation, we are faced with the frustration of muddle and confusion. Deirdre's whole life seems to be lived in disguise, with a purpose hidden even from herself, until her spirits abandon her and she can act freely. Certainly the Narrator claims that she is somehow "marked" from birth (476). The unhappiness of her childhood and adolescence was her first secret passage; her life as a medium seemed a way out, but, like Spenser's Guyon in Mammon's cave, she causes her own illness by ignoring her physical needs while using her spiritual powers. Her desertion by her spirits frees her from her life as a medium, but it is only the economic power of Edwina's fortune that eventually gives her independence.

Despite the Narrator's distress at the possibility, it seems likely that Deirdre will choose Hassan Agha as her life partner. Although Doctor Stoughton might seem the more 'suitable' match, she knows he will return her to the kind of confinement she has so successfully escaped from in the past. If she would not have him when she had to work for a living it seems unlikely that she will have him now that she has her own fortune.

Octavia and Samantha are the closest this novel comes to modern feminist heroines; they manage to use the master's tools not only to demolish the master's house, but also to build themselves new ones. Octavia keeps her best side to the camera throughout the performance – Bender describes her

as: "genuinely loving and tolerant, keeping track of her wayward sisters....Generous of spirit...able to forego...opium-laced nostrums...and meet the world on its own terms" (141) – as she coldly and quietly goes about murdering her husband and son to remake her life to better suit herself.

Octavia and Samantha have achieved love in its happiest, most satisfying form – that of a truly equal and respectful marriage – at the end of *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, but these have not been traditional courtships. They have escaped to this state by their own actions and against the will of their father/grandfather/society, exactly the opposite of their mother, whose marriage, after her 'rebellious' earlier life, was a relief to her father.

The Narrator's attempt to escape from the restrictions placed on her as a spinster is successful only so far as it frees her to legitimately imagine and write about sexual matters – note her rather hollow concern that one might be "susceptible to wickedness merely by *taking note of it*" and that the "chronicler, however innocent" might be "guilty of *disseminating* that very wickedness she would *transcend*" (449). The use of the word "disseminating" reveals that she is still limited by the necessity to use the male-dominated medium, and by the necessity to package the salacious in a fitting container for public consumption, and that these requirements are becoming burdensome to the point of almost blocking her art: "Indeed, I am bound to confess here that I have, upon several occasions, shrunk from taking up this strand, in my intricate fancywork, out of that timidity of my sex, that has rendered us so generally unfit for the creation of great works..." (522). The final outcome of her escape attempt is one of the open endings of the novel. Will her biography of John Quincy Zinn be published, and, if it is, will she be lauded or damned? Will she go on to become a

famous author, or be consigned to oblivion and the depths of her secret passage?

Strain as they might, all of Prudence's daughters must return to Bloodsmoor to understand their true limits, rather than those that are imposed on them, and to complete their quests in the place where they began. Their return to Bloodsmoor to attend the reading of Edwina's Will brings them back, but they all, with the exception of Constance Philippa (who could be said not to have returned at all), decide to stay. They may not feel that they know the place for the first time, but they each now know themselves for the first time; each one has become her own person.

In *A Bloodsmoor Romance* Oates has parodied the greatest excesses of the nineteenth century's public show of family life and romantic love to reveal something about the real effects of these concepts on women's lives, both for the nineteenth century and for our own. It is not that falling in love will always lead to disaster; the women who eventually choose to love on their own terms in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* live happily enough. But first they each have to move alone through a passage of doubt and uncertainty as the old, male-defined standards and choices slowly lose their hold on them. From the realisation that they are no more than supports or chattels for their father, husband and grandfather they each use the experiences they have had to forge a new identity: independent, strong, and at peace with the world.

The means by which the female characters of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* perceive their position as women, in a society where their roles are restricted to support and silent endurance, are loneliness and lust. Their

non-existence as speaking, desiring subjects creates a narrowing of their lives which, eventually, shows each of them the entrance of her secret passage. Their need drives them into the passage, but its negotiation must be done by language; they must be able to articulate what they want (if only to themselves) and be able to act to obtain it. This act requires great bravery, as sexual desire is represented in their lives only by silence, and the slippery language that they must use in their escape bids is only borrowed. It does not belong to them; they have no words for what they feel. But they still must try, and all of them (except the oldest generation represented by Edwina and Sarah) will succeed in escaping the objectifications that confine them. Oates, in much of her writing, emphasises sexual desire as a means to finding and negotiating this passage, and this has led to problems with feminist critics, who see Oates as implying that women need men. What Oates is saying (and continues to say in her most recent novels) is that sexual experience is as much a part of the rites of passage for women as it is for men. Pretending that it is not is a kind of new puritanism that does not serve feminism well.

It is not that Oates is completely cynical about romantic love, but the instances of love being the spur to escape in *A Bloodsmoor Romance* are often not quite what they appear. The Narrator's attempt to throw the rosy glow of romance over every motive and relationship often distracts us from the complexity of the women's feelings. For example, would Samantha, that essentially practical young woman, have ever acted on her love for Nahum if he had not also presented a means of escape from an unimaginably awful marriage? Might she not have chosen to stay well away from her secret passage in the safety of her father's laboratory until, and even after, his death?

By writing a post-modern pastiche, which is also a parody, about the last years of pre-Freudian American society, and by using a Narrator who is steeped in the mythos of her time, Oates allows us post-Freudians to reflect not only on the past but on ourselves. The parallels between the situation of the women of Bloodsmoor and modern women are subtly drawn throughout, as this study has shown, often by means of a parodic overkill effect that leaves the reader breathless at Oates's daring, while inescapably considering the implications. One question remains: why did Oates call her work a Romance?

In his satirical novel *Small World*, David Lodge puts a theory about the nature of the Romance into the mouth of one of his characters:

No sooner is one crisis...averted than a new one presents itself; no sooner has one mystery been solved than another is raised; no sooner has one adventure been concluded than another begins. The narrative questions open and close, open and close, like the contractions of the vaginal muscles in intercourse, and the process is in principle endless. The greatest and most characteristic romances are often unfinished – they end only with the author's exhaustion, as a woman's capacity for orgasm is limited only by her physical stamina. Romance is a multiple orgasm (322-3).

Certainly, Bloodsmoor has an almost infinite number of (mostly unanswered) narrative questions, and successive waves of climaxes. The ending, which is in a sense arbitrary, being placed by the Narrator on the last stroke of the old century, is a distinct anti-male-power anti-climax, as Deirdre quietly burns down John Quincy Zinn's lab to destroy the formula that could end the world.

One of the quotes that form an introduction to another postmodern look at the nineteenth century in terms of the twentieth, A S Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, is from the preface of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables*. He says that, in a novel, the writer must make an attempt to reflect

reality, but, by calling a work a Romance, the writer is freed to present "the truth of the human heart...under circumstances...of the writer's own choosing or creation." He goes on: "The point of view in which a tale comes under the Romantic definition lies in the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us." It is difficult to imagine a clearer statement of Oates's main achievement in *A Bloodsmoor Romance*, a novel in which the restrictions of nineteenth century family life are parodied to expose the misogyny of contemporary American society.

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