

Traumatized Psyche and Mental Underrepresentation in Joyce Carol Oates We Were the Mulvaney's

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Abstract

Sexual trauma is depicted using conventional storylines. However, Joyce Carol Oates used a different strategy in her book *We Were the Mulvaney's* to highlight the severity of the trauma: mental underrepresentation. Marianne's ideas visually resemble a black mark that weakens Marianne's intellect and retards the trauma. Judd, the narrator, utilizes the mark to demonstrate how Marianne's mental pain impacts him and undermines his sense of self as a narrator as well as to tell the story of a traumatized mind. Oates' work is all the more significant because of this type of mental underrepresentation, which improves our comprehension of trauma.

Key Words: traumatized, psyche, underrepresentation, migration, fragmented

Introduction:

Joyce Carol Oates is a prolific American novelist and playwright. She began writing when she was fourteen years. Oates' work reflects her own experiences. It's a product of the influence she had in Detroit in the 1930s and '60s, and it helped her become an academician. Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Mann, and D.H. Lawrence's work influenced her writing. She graduated in 1960 and went on to continue her studies at the University of Wisconsin. In 1961, she became a full-time writer and met Evelyn Shrifter, the owner of the Vanguard Press. Her work is often about violence, racism, trauma adolescence, women, and poverty. Joyce Carol Oates's works explore the sexual trauma which disrupts the narrator or the protagonist to suffer physically and psychologically. It shows the severity of PTSD Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in *We Were the Mulvaney's*.

Traumatized Psyche and mental underrepresentation in *We Were the Mulvaney's*:

The present study focuses on the novel *We Were*

the Mulvaney's published in the year 1996. The novel examines how the American family has become fragmented. The family name *Mulvaney's* appears next to the names of every character in the book as an indicator of who they are. The *Family Pictures*, the *Hunstmans*, the *Pilgrims*, and the *Hard Reckoning* are the four sections that make up the story. The four portions are further divided into an assortment of subplots, each of which tells the tale of a different family. Judd describes each member of his family in the first chapter, "Story Book House," and claims that the readers could bemoan, envy, or extol them under any circumstance. Judd, who began telling the tale when he was six years old and is now thirty, provides the opening narration. He portrays the traumatic family migrations from his memories. Joyce Carol Oates employs Mental Underrepresentation as a technique that ensures uninterrupted transmission of Judd's narration. Oates makes frequent use of the narrator's expression of the traumatized psyche of the other characters in the book by using this as a storytelling device. Identification of unclear situations and misty recollections is made easier by the representation of the real characters in

the story as told by the narrator.

Oates depicts a conservative and pious family living on High Point Farm in the little town of Mt. Ephraim, upstate New York, in *We Were the Mulvaney*s. The plot revolves around Marianne, the daughter of Mr. Michael John Mulvaney, Sr., and Mrs. Corianne Mulvaney. Zachary Lundt, a classmate, raped her. With four children, it is an affluent and happy family. Muke or Mule Mulvaney Jr., the older son, is always away from home and wants to join the army. Patrick, or P. J., the next son, is a brilliant and well-informed biology student who is eager to impose his justice on Zachary to avenge Marianne. Judson Andrew is also called Judd the last son, and he is spoiled by everyone else. He is also known as Baby, Dimple, and Ranger. Their farm is widely known to everyone in the neighborhood since they have employed over 150 people on their farm. At the beginning of the novel, all of the family members were scattered from their homes due to the traumatized event that happened to Marianne Mulvaney in 1976.

Oates reveals the difficulties society has in acknowledging and accepting rape trauma through her examination of the traumatized psyche. Through *We Were the Mulvaney*s, Oates shows how society's failure to assist a rape victim can tear a family apart. *We Were the Mulvaney*s by Joyce Carol Oates explores the very concrete, tangible consequences of a sexually traumatized psyche. Oates makes the reader acknowledge the subtle and harmful effects of cultural rape scripts, which exacerbate the survivor's and her family's trauma. This trauma affects not only Marianne, who is raped but her entire family, especially Judd, the narrator. Members of society abandon the Mulvaney's by using rape and scripts to inhibit their psychological growth and healing--a cultural misuse of power towards women. *We Were the Mulvaney*s demonstrates that no family can simply survive a traumatic event. Even the most loving families can be torn apart because people, both inside and outside the family, don't know how to break free from deeply held social beliefs.

Before the narrator, Judd, reveals Marianne's rape, he recalls Della Rae Duncan's rape,

emphasizing the obvious rape scripts that the complacent, middle-class Mt. Ephraim community has already embedded in its social unconscious. Della Rae's rape occurs following the final football game of the 1971 season. Judd's first-person narration abruptly shifts to a third-person, communal voice, leveling a slew of accusations at the victim. "What can you expect of a girl like that. That kind of girl. Her mother, her sisters. County welfare. Runs in the family" (48).

The community's judgment, shaped by class, race, and gender biases, is reserved solely for Della Rae and her family, not for the football players who exploit her.

The vivacious Marianne represents a feminine ideal. Considered a "good Christian girl" (38), she is loved and cherished by her schoolmates and family. "Marianne Mulvaney was so well-liked, so popular, she rarely lacked for people eager to do her favors" (36). Her rape on the night of the Valentine's Prom by senior Zach Lundt, on the other hand, demonstrates how

fickle such love can be. Marianne is victimized not only by the rape, but also by cultural rape scripts that are subtly ingrained in society, creating double standards for men and women in terms of sexual and, by extension, social behavior. These scripts describe what society considers to be appropriate for female knowledge and behavior. Oates explicitly demonstrates how these scripts work and how they harm her characters. Cultural rape scripts excuse boys from grotesque sexual behavior, like drawing obscene things on girls' desks because

"Boys will be boys!" (161).

*We Were the Mulvaney*s demonstrates that class distinctions do not shield middle and upper-class women from cultural rape scripts. Marianne's social standing as the daughter of a hardworking, middle-class father and a devoted Christian mother does not protect her from social criticism. Marianne is unable to discuss her trauma and begin to heal because society appears to reserve its harshest judgment of rape victims for lower-class girls. She isolates herself from potential help by putting on a protective mask.

"She'd prepared certain words she must say, repeat, offered like small semi-precious gems, all she had to offer ... 'Jill James' had her own words to offer, of course. For that was what they did, adults: uttered their words prepared beforehand, as you uttered yours" (153). In her traumatized state Marianne fails to live up to social standards and ends up with "what Corinne had already shrewdly identified as her rag-quilt life" (352).

Marianne discovers that society treats women in the same way that it treats works of art or discarded rags. They idealize conforming women and punish those who break social norms. Marianne, unable to overcome her fear, finds herself betraying her mother and her traditional values by failing to live the ideal life expected of her. Marianne's trauma is exacerbated by the rejection, and she is unable to overcome her self-doubt. In the novel's first four sections, which focus on rape and prosecution, Oates demonstrates how the rape and the resulting traumas of social and familial betrayal continue to affect the Mulvaney's lives. Oates depicts rape as if it were an unattended child.

Scarring is produced by the wound itself. If the trauma is not acknowledged by the victim, it will fester and poison the rest of the psyche. Oates demonstrates that the resulting trauma of rape has no clear resolution or cure, particularly when suppressed. According to Caruth, trauma survivors unconsciously recreate their trauma, preventing them from moving beyond their pain. Marianne unconsciously acknowledges the trauma in her attempts to avoid her pain, enacting her desire to return to a safer time. Marianne takes on some of the residence's management responsibilities and recreates the chores list for the various residents.

"Within days there was a new roster; on a bulletin board in the kitchen, amid colorful decorative touches, dried wildflowers, snapshots of Co-op activities, sunburst ribbons, were smiling crayon drawings of the member's faces, and beneath the faces were notecards listing their duties" (316).

Oates switches the scene to Marianne to show the readers the depth of her feelings because

Judd's narration could not adequately explain Marianne's affection for her family: "Resisting – temptation. Marianne hadn't known she was strong enough but yes, she was" (332). Hewie, a fellow employee, and Marianne both attend the funeral. She keeps her distance from the family members and distances herself from them because she is not one of them invited me. She responds indifferently to all of Hewie's inquiries regarding her past:

"Out of obscurity I came. To obscurity I can return" (320).

After twelve years, Marianne, who is now 29 years old, has moved in with veterinarian Dr. Whittaker West. Michael Mulvaney Sr. is diagnosed with lung cancer at the end of the book. Corinne called Marianne at this time to let her know her father wants to meet her. Marianne's unbroken happiness is interrupted when she learns that her father had made his last call from his hospital bed:

"Corinne said, "Honey, wait – we're in Rochester. At the University Medical Clinic. Hurry.

"So, Marianne knew what it was, what it must be. Hurry. Hurry. Hurry. After twelve years of exile. Hurry!" (399)

In the clinic, Marianne sees her father and breaks down in tears as she tells him about her loss. Michael recognizes Marianne as his adult daughter. After twelve years, he no longer harbors the rage he once did, and he touches her and addresses her by name. Marianne is overjoyed to finally hear her father call her by name:

"He called you 'Marianne'. That's what I heard." Marianne said, "I guess he's forgive me? I mean – he loves me again, he's not ashamed of me?" and Judd said, "Dad always loved you, Marianne" (428).

Despite having Judd as the book's narrator, each individual has a part to play in expressing their traumatized psyche so that readers can experience the depth of the family's longing and love. The novel's epilogue, "Reunion: Fourth of July 1993," may be found at the end and is

entirely told by Judd. The Mulvaney family appeared to be blessed by everything in the nicest order during the reunion program, which was given by the youngest son, Judd. They reside on the idyllic High Point Farm.

The horror of rape, the trauma of discovering rape's occurrence, and the damaging effects of such traumas on people and their loved ones are all brought to light in Oates' works. She never minimizes trauma. Oates aims to increase societal awareness of the effects of certain women's repressed traumas. Oates also demonstrates the depth of trauma by showing how her characters battle with their behavior and power dynamics, frequently acting in a way that appears to be self-destructive for no apparent reason.

Oates shows how trauma affects every relationship and every encounter a person has, leading to fight-or-flight responses and isolation from society. Trauma victims will start a task, a career, or a relationship with the intention of succeeding, but fear of the power they will hold in the situation may cause them to give up on their goals and keep the cycle of their trauma going. Oates's portrayal of society's management of that pain as well as the characters' purportedly inscrutable responses to it. By the end of her stories, Oates frequently leaves her characters still dealing with loneliness and anxiety because she refuses to idealize their misery. In doing so, Oates highlights how society has frequently failed to appreciate those who have experienced trauma, failing to understand that trauma is more than just an inability to handle stress.

Conclusion:

We Were the Mulvaney by Joyce Carol Oates is a darkly complicated story that demonstrates how unresolved grief may exist even in laughing. It also demonstrates how survivors can experience trauma for up to 14 years before they are able to get over it. Oates highlights the troublesome aspects of trauma. She does not exalt affliction. Instead, she criticizes social structures and ideologies that fail to assist victims and worsen their pain, which affects both the victim and their families. Because of benevolent sexism-fueled rape scripts, survivors are left alone and deal with

the effects of actions they had no control over. The victims are forced to piece together a "rag-quilt life" due to fear and hypervigilance.

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