

## When History is Narrativized: The Self between Faction and Fiction in Joyce Carol Oates's *The Accursed* (2013)

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### Abstract

*This article tackles one of the basic theories of human identity that is definitely the individual's sense of "self". By analyzing it from a purely postmodernist perspective, the 'Self' is considered as multifarious and unstable. In *The Accursed*, one of Joyce Carol Oates's most outstanding novels, the idea of the self as homogeneous and cohesive is denounced through exploring the 'lives' and 'selves' of a number of American historical figures. Mainly by 'narrativizing history,' Oates fuses fictional and fantastical elements within the very 'real' moments in history in an attempt to critically unveil some influential ideological assumptions of the time.*

**Keywords:** Self, 'narrativized history', fantasy, postmodernist.

الذات بين الحقيقة والخيال في رواية: عندما يسرد التاريخ (*The Accursed*)

لـ جويس كارول أوتس

### ملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة نظرية أساسية في الهوية البشرية والتي تتمثل في شعور الفرد "بالذات". ومن خلال تحليل المصطلح من منظور ما بعد الحداثة اتضح أن الذات متعددة وغير مستقرة. في رواية جويس كارول أوتس "الملعونون" تم رفض فكرة أن الذات متجانسة ومتماسكة من خلال الخوض في "حياة" وذوات "عدد من الشخصيات التاريخية الأمريكية. ومن خلال "سرد التاريخ" واعتمادا على عناصر خيالية في وصف اللحظات "الحقيقية" في التاريخ الأمريكي، حاولت أوتس كشف النقاب عن بعض الافتراضات الإيديولوجية المؤثرة في ذلك الوقت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ذات، "تاريخ سردي"، خيال، ما بعد حداثة.

**Quand l'histoire est racontée: le soi entre réalité et fiction dans le roman:**

*Les maudits de Joyce Carol Oates*

### Résumé

Cet article aborde une théorie fondamentale de l'identité humaine, à savoir le sens de soi. En l'analysant dans une perspective postmoderniste, le «soi» est considéré comme multiple et instable. Dans *Les maudits*, un des romans les plus célèbres de Joyce Carol Oates, l'idée du soi homogène et cohérent est dénoncée en explorant les "vies" et les "soi (s)" de plusieurs personnages historiques américains. Principalement, en "racontant l'histoire", Oates fusionne des éléments fictionnels et fantastiques dans les moments les plus «réels» de l'histoire pour tenter de dévoiler de manière critique certaines hypothèses idéologiques influentes de l'époque.

**Mots-clés:** Soi, 'histoire racontée', fantaisie, postmoderniste.

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## Introduction:

When asked, in an interview, how accurate the portraits of the various historical figures in *The Accursed* are and whether Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, was really a dictatorial, awkward person, Joyce Carol Oates answered:

The portrait of Woodrow Wilson as a very limited person, a racist, a misogynist, and a Christian conservative with charity for few persons beyond those of his own kind is historically valid. Wilson was exceedingly thin-skinned and prone to feuds, possibly as a byproduct of his excessive self-medicating. He was something of a dictator, though always cloaking his ambition in the loftiest of Christian terms<sup>(1)</sup>.

In fact, Oates is introducing us to one basic theory of human identity that is definitely the individual's "self" and its representation in literature. During the romantic period, the notion of the self was considered of supreme value and substance making ways, simply, to existential quests for it. This very concern is broadened in the realist-psychological literature of modernity to encompass all states of relationships that tie the self with the world. The post-war American novel,<sup>(2)</sup> especially, presented in detail the absolute loss of the self, referring to it as an "identity fable"<sup>(3)</sup> in an attempt to describe the long and sore process that awaits the intellectual passing into postmodernity<sup>(4)</sup>. In a world witnessing the destruction of its most fundamental institutions of the family, society and nation, one's sense of self is disturbed amid chaotic and unstable realities of competing nationalisms, regionalisms, fundamentalisms, and various ethnicities. What is noticed, nevertheless, in all these theorizations is that the 'self'—being hidden, relational or completely lost—was treated as one plenary entity.

A more recent view, however, studies the self as multiple, as socially constructed and as being subject to perspective(s). In his famous book *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (2000), Kenneth Gergen asserts: "we believe that the biggest question of all, in the matter of the self, is: Do we even have a self? [and that] we have no way of "getting down to the self as it is." (133) The reason is that the person possesses more than one self as proved in neurology and modern psychology, and that the old belief of having a continual and unified self must be an illusion<sup>(5)</sup>. As a matter of fact, the more one experiences social contacts, the more multifarious perspectives she /he receives about her/his 'selves' making it hard to decide which self is more 'real'.

Before starting to detail in this phenomenon, a clarification of the concept of self in the postmodern era is of paramount importance. As further explained by Gergen, the self is the saturated entity of the subject that resulted from disjointed and disparate images of postmodern culture. This saturation creates a central psychological problem for subjects due to unprecedented increase in the populace of the self. That is, due to the expansion and variety in technological means of communication and media, or 'the technologies of social saturation' as Gergen often calls them, social encounters increase, too, in terms of rate of contact, total numbers and multiplicity. People are; thus, flooded with knowledge concerning different groups, different people, different values and different styles of expression. Such a reality has led them to doubt possessing a clear, unified and stable self. Furthermore, since postmodernism is based on philosophical critique of knowledge as owning no sure foundation, people internalize this doubt as a chronic psychological disease. The latter that engendered a considerable amount of 'reflexibility' resulted from an endless self-monitoring in a culture featured by social saturation, constant change, and inherent uncertainty.

This status of the postmodern self is skeptical to the point of nihilism and herein lies our interest. It is to try to analyse this conviction as seen in the literature of a nation of immigrants, ethnicities, religions and many other large differences as the USA. In a country of ceaseless change at all levels, is it really possible to preserve one's true self and can Oates's statement in *Solstice*: "I never change, I simply become more myself" remain valid? Regrettably, both the USA and Oates's fictional worlds are peopled by selves that are copies of copies that drive us to edge toward the more unsettling question best expressed in

Gergen's: "On what grounds can we assume that beneath the layers of accumulated understandings there is, in fact, an obstinate 'self' to be located?"<sup>(6)</sup> Of course, this is a hard task especially when applying this same Gergenian analysis to the self as portrayed in texts of literature and of history. Historical figures are themselves, in a way, social beings that we come to encounter and to know about through various texts produced either by them or by historians. These very texts obviously are not void of perspective; can we, for instance, know if this self of Woodrow Wilson— as viewed by Oates— is the real one? If it is so, what about the one we find in his letters and diaries or the one portrayed in the biography written by Arthur S. Link in 1963? How can we decide? In what ways do the 'historical self' and the 'fictional self' of Wilson resemble each other? To sum it up, is the 'history' related in the novel true?

### 1. Historiographic Metafiction: The Revival of the Historical Self

The existence of multi-selves, or the idea of double-consciousness within the psychology and identity of an individual, complicates our perception of who historical figures really are. In addition to books of history that present a plethora of analyses of historical men and women, literary works add other accounts about them usually by fusing together the 'historical' and the 'fictional.' In fact, the incorporation of historical events in fiction is not a new literary phenomenon. Fiction during the nineteenth century witnessed a wide array of historical elements included within the most imaginable materials. The contribution of historical fantasy (novels and plays mainly) was considered as an escape from the 'abstractness' of History to more vivid forms of human expression<sup>(7)</sup>. Yet, the issue is that these writings "never questioned the authority and 'truthfulness' of History."<sup>(8)</sup> Rather, any text that includes past dates, past events or names of people, who lived in the past, is assumed to be a part of the unequivocal reality and any supplemental material is thought to be the only fantasy in this account. Yet, by considering both texts as Man's production that is always subject to all subjectivities and deficiencies, the other possibility of the genuineness of History to be blown apart can be also compelling. Indeed, endless examples of historical 'facts', proved to be wrong after investigation, are accumulated in many recent writings as illustrated in Lubomir Dolezel's "Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage" (2010). In this article, the author talks about the impossibility of only one world to exist being in science, history or fiction, insisting, instead, on 'possible-worlds' to be taken into account. He gives the example of physicist J.S. Bell constructing many models of possible worlds of quantum mechanics and asking himself the same questions a novelist or a historian often asks:

To what extent are these possible worlds fictions? They are like literary fictions in that they are free inventions of the human mind. In theoretical physics, the inventor knows from the beginning that the work is fictional when it deals with a symplified world in which space has only one or two dimentions instead of three. More often it is not known that the hypothesis has proved wrong, that fiction is involved. When being serious, when not exploring deliberately symplified models, the theoretical physicist differs from the novelist in thinking that maybe the story might be true. Similarly, historians construct the models of the past with the hope that their possible stories "might be true"(43).

Starting from the twentieth century, however, writers become conscious of the ideological character of language and narratives as they are both forms of discourse. Identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, history and narrative are not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure<sup>(9)</sup>. Hence, neither literary nor historical texts are innocent in conveying "truth." They are rather loaded with their authors' ideologies and discourses that stem directly from other texts from the past that postmodern historians and men of letters deploy within their own complex textuality leaving space for the most postmodern quality of "intertextuality" to take place. This is what makes literature and history converge; it is, as Hutcheon remarks, their "inescapable textuality."<sup>(10)</sup> The very attempt at reporting the outward realities in a written form subjects the objective

considerations to varying levels of “fantasy.” A historian and a novelist dealing, for instance, with racial prejudices toward the black intellectuals of Princeton between 1882 and 1930 obviously will do it differently though both might have checked the same available sources on the event. Historian John Milton Cooper Jr. explains that the former president of both Princeton and the United States had never “showed signs of racial prejudice”<sup>(11)</sup> despite the fact that he “explicitly discouraged an accomplished African American student from applying to Princeton, on the grounds that the student would not find a welcoming atmosphere—which was almost certainly true.”<sup>(12)</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, however, as a novelist with other projects in mind, provides another account of the event in *The Accursed* by portraying the unaccepted student as Wilson’s distant relative and by referring to another person, who is deprived from attending a University meeting, as Booker T. Washington. In fact, it is because History is recognized for its apparent authenticity and literature for its fictionality that the former is tagged ‘historicity’ and consistency and the latter ‘literariness’ and unreliability. But the issue is that since nothing guarantees that the ‘story’ inside any of these texts is the ultimate, conclusive reality, both “textual versions” of reality are feasible.

With the dawn of post-structuralist theories in the 1960s that set forth the autonomy of language as a social construct, history ultimately ended together with historiography. The latter is no longer considered “the objective and disinterested recording of the past ; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past.”<sup>(13)</sup> Meanwhile, out of the Absolute, single History emerged a multitude of hi (stories) accompanied by a change in the relation between the “faction” that the former exhibits and the “fiction” that the postmodern artefact calls for. The outcome is what Linda Hutcheon termed as ‘historiographic metafiction’.

As far as American fiction is concerned, its divergence from the strictly modernist closed forms of expression, that inhibited it for more than a century, gave birth to social, psychological but more importantly historical concerns of the novel, in particular<sup>(14)</sup>. It is, therefore, all the more remarkable that a great number of postmodernist novelists has turned to the common past as a source of inspiration. Many of these novels have been plotted on sections from twentieth-century history or even before. Yet, the integration of the two disciplines is not that safe as producers of “historiographic metafiction” work to situate it within “historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction.”<sup>(15)</sup> Paradoxically enough, all such attempts resulted in novels where “the conventions of both fiction and historiography [are] simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied.”<sup>(16)</sup> None of the disciplines, consequently, gains a confidently dominant supremacy in the world of postmodern literature. History contributes with basic, almost genuine events, names and dates and fiction with imaginative, creative details about the same elements. A reader of historiographic metafiction, ultimately, will ask “whether the historian discovers or invents the totalizing narrative form or model used. Of course, both discovery and invention would involve some resource to artifice and imagination, but there is a significant difference in the epistemological value traditionally attached to the two acts. It is this distinction that postmodernism problematizes<sup>(17)</sup>.

Such a conviction problematizes our perception of the division fictional/historical further and further. Also, it calls the attention, in this article, to a dimension which has received somewhat less debate and which is central to any consideration of the self in a global context. This is what would be referred to as “the postmodern psychology of the historical self.” Modern American psychology, in fact, has taken a major step toward understanding the human self. With the aid of the discipline of neurology, psychologists are now debunking the idea of the unified self, asserting, meanwhile, its multiplicity into ‘selves’. This belief, we consider, can be functional in analyzing historical figures as they appear in postmodern fiction. The end in this paper, therefore, will be twofold: first, suggesting how this reading of Oates’s novel relates to some latest theorizations of the relationship between history and

fiction in the contemporary novel, notably Linda Hutcheon's premise of intertextuality, self-reflexivity and parodied history. Then, clarifying the ways Oates employs to adopt fantasy both to create other 'selves' of historical figures and to criticize particular political policies and socio-economical approaches they advocated.

## 2- Intertextuality and Narrativization of History:

The Accursed follows the lives of real inhabitants of Princeton, New Jersey in 1905. In a complex intertwining plot that reaches its climax with savage lynchings of a black young man and his pregnant sister, apparently by the zealot Ku Klux Klan<sup>(18)</sup>, the novel sheds light on the total absence of official condemnation of the crime. The aristocratic white families and intellectuals presented a strict and absolute silence on the event despite the ceaseless calls of the black community and the abolitionists to take action and avoid further complications. Suddenly, and as an act of a certain divine revenge, a horrifying chain of events and supernatural beings start to emerge until it became clear that a type of a curse is chasing the intellectual and indisputably privileged class of Princeton. Demons and monsters come to this town to settle an incomparable psychological horror as a type of punishment.

As the reader can notice, the novel has many events in US history at its basis, but more remarkably Wilson as president of Princeton university with all conflicts this engenders. The eradication of the eating clubs, the indifference to racial lynchings and the integration of the graduate school are plans that Wilson executed reflecting the leftism of his politics. To postmodernists, and Oates mainly, his policy offers a hint of an increasingly democratized bourgeoisie in the present day USA. Also, it provides a thorough account of his competition with Andrew Fleming West about the founding and the leadership of Princeton graduate school. So far, history is strongly present with all its chronotopic contextualizations— dates, names and places— perfectly foregrounded in the narrative, but what is innovative is the supernatural elements Oates integrated within the very "real" historical components being setting, events or characters. Via the voice of her narrator, she criticizes historians' vision of history as real through including fantasy: "[H]istorians," the narrator insists at the conclusion of his historical book, "have tried to explain these unique events as 'natural.'"<sup>(19)</sup> The final product, therefore, is what Hutcheon referred to as a "paradoxical beast" that doubly challenges the possibility of representing real people in an art-form and the possibility of separating art from the real world of the same people<sup>(20)</sup> Historiographic metafiction is meant to "enshrine the past and to question it. And this is the postmodern paradox."<sup>(21)</sup> Through her novel, Oates forces us to rethink and perhaps reinterpret history, and she does so, mainly, through her narrator M.W van Dyck II caught in the dilemma of whether literature makes history or history makes literature: "the truths of fiction reside in metaphor," he wrote, "but metaphor is here generated by history."<sup>(22)</sup> In another blunt reference to the intermingled history with fiction, the acknowledgement section of *The Accursed* encompasses the titles, authors and dates of publication of the books Oates used when writing the novel and a map of Princeton during the time of the curse to which no historical document—to our knowledge— has made a reference.

In fact, Oates does not share her predecessors' confidence in the objective presentation of history. It is her sarcastic mélange of the factual and the fictive and her deliberate anachronisms that underline this disbelief. That is, according to her, no clear-cut dividing line between the texts of history and literature does really exist. Therefore, she feels free to have recourse to both disciplines. In *The Accursed*, the focus is on Princeton, New Jersey, in 1905. Yet, the intertexts of history double up with those of fantastic literature reaffirming "the reality of the latter, insisting on its rendering of the events as a series of genuinely marvelous, genuinely supernatural moments in history."<sup>(23)</sup> "A History of the Tragic Events of 1905-1906, Princeton, New Jersey"<sup>(24)</sup> is the title the narrator gave to "history" or rather "his/story" of the strange happenings of the period, but what makes us doubt his narration is his being the grandson of one of the prominent families in Princeton involved in the events. Another thing that gave way to a higher degree of subjectivity and unreliability is the fact that

M.W van Dyck II has finished his manuscript in 1984 (at the age of 78), and now, he is narrating it. The reader can guess his age at the time of narration, then judge his authority, especially that he is the only survivor of the van Dicks; "they are all dead now—that is why no one is here. Except me", the narrator declares<sup>(25)</sup>. Moreover, as historians usually do, van Dyck "narrates" the history by summing up the time span to less than the exact ten years of the "tragic events" for "purposes of aesthetic unity"<sup>(26)</sup>. This is exactly the essence of historiographic metafiction. In the narrator's own words: "[t]hough it is the rare historian who will speak candidly of such matters, all of us who are engaged in the rendering of the past—by way of the amassing, selection, and distillation of a multitude of pertinent facts—are commonly beset by two dilemmas: the phenomenon of simultaneity of event, and the phenomenon of authenticity of evidence"<sup>(27)</sup>. One should no more talk of history and literature as separate disciplines in a postmodern era, but rather, of historical metafiction where neither a historian nor a novelist are sure about at least two things: about the chronology of events and more importantly about their source. It is in this very moment that intertextuality becomes possible.

By definition, intertextuality is the literal and effective presence in a text of another text. By text, the French linguist Julia Kristeva, who coined the term, meant "the permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another."<sup>(28)</sup> As far as history and literature are concerned, this mechanism becomes effective only when it draws upon the concept of ideology merged in modern contexts. It is practiced in various ways in literature, but in Oates's case, it is, usually, by entering the world of history by means of selection, playfulness and criticism. In other words, the novelist tackles episodes in the lives of major or secondary, real or imaginary figures in the history of the western world in various fields with the inclusion of gothic, and fantastical elements to fulfill a given dogma. Moreover, she often targets to convince the reader that the intertextuality between literary and historical discourses will result in a historiographic metafiction, where even the supernatural must be trusted.

The narrator of *The Accursed*, for instance, insists on the necessity of accepting a supernatural interpretation of events in Princeton, and perhaps more significantly, on understanding his own task as a historian as not being in any inconsistency with this supernatural reading. Indeed, no distinction between the fantastic and the historical is provided by van Dyck. Rather, he includes the historical record within the fantastic, demonstrating that everything else must be a "profound misreading"<sup>(29)</sup>. He, even, accuses his "historian rivals" to be shy, misleaders, and even liars about portraying reality when he asserts ironically that: "[h]istorians must rely on sources. Historians do not "invent" sources. Yet it is as much of an invention, that's to say a lie, to omit or distort sources, in the interests of protecting 'innocent parties.'"<sup>(30)</sup>. For this end, historical and fictional events and characters gain the same position in *The Accursed* through a concoction that makes it difficult to discriminate them. Historical figures— like Woodrow Wilson, Grover Cleveland, Andrew Fleming West, Booker. T. Washington, Upton Sinclair, Jack London— are all resuscitated in a net of interrelations with fictional characters— like Reverend Winslow Slade, Annabel and Josiah (Slade's grandchildren), Lieutenant Bayard (Annabel's fiancé), Axon Mayte (the supernatural kidnapper of Annabel), Horace and Adelaide Burr (detectives) and even with parodied fictional characters— like Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective).

### **3- Self-reflexivity and Parody: The Legacy of Historiographic Metafiction.**

As has become typical in writings of this type, plots develop in a highly metafictional narrative pattern and self-reflexive annotations that permeate the novel. By self-reflexivity, postmodernists refer to narrators and characters reflecting upon their own processes of artful composition. Apparently responding to the same project of historiographic metafiction, the concept of the omniscient, all-knowing narrator is revisited through this technique. Moreover, the 'self-conscious' or 'self-reflective narrator' becomes central for the process of parody to take place. The latter usually aims at imitating a given writer, artist, or genre, exaggerating it

deliberately to produce a comic effect. In *The Accursed*, however, the humorous air does not exist leaving space to a certain dark, metaphysical reflexion to engender, instead.

For instance, Josiah explains to his benefit the intertextual echoes brought in by the early expeditions to the “terra incognita” or the unknown lands when he wrote: “The southern sky has no history, it is promised, & no memory; no mind. For God has not yet been made man in that place, nor ever God. So it is promised and so I believe. Is it your son Josiah who writes these stark words, or another? No matter, --we sail to terra incognita as one.”<sup>(31)</sup>. This quote is a clear parody of one of the most famous expeditors and authors in English literature, Joseph Conrad, who reported in an essay how western novelists adapted true-life narratives of perilous adventures to their fictions and spun imaginative tales of quest in unknown lands. Conrad wrote: “Regions unknown! My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous, and devoted men, nibbling at the edges, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling.”<sup>(32)</sup>. Contrary to most explorators, Josiah’s aim behind the expedition is to look for Annabel, his sister kidnapped the day of her wedding by a supernatural man, but, in fact, it is no more than an escape from the bitter reality of an assaulted daughter of the most famous Princetonian family. His aim is much like that of postmodernists who instead of looking for the truth, they prefer to construct one that they will, cognizant enough, reconstruct again and again. Similarly, the narrator’s intellectual self-awareness extends to include the literary style as in: “I am embarrassed to state here, so bluntly, at the very start of my chronicle... I apologize for this intercalation! It is not so much an emotional as it is and aesthetic and moral outburst I promise will not happen again”<sup>(33)</sup>. In other occasions, he permits himself to allow the reader a chance to be selective toward what he narrates: “Therefore I suggest: the reader who wants to know a little more of my chronicle should read this postscript...”<sup>(34)</sup>. That is to say, the truth modernists were pursuing has no existence in writings of voyagers or chroniclers or in any other type of texts; it is made by means of amalgamating fiction with history.

Unlike the majority of American metafiction that stresses the history of the twentieth century, *The Accursed* went back to parody and revisited sections of the literary history of the eighteenth century of another nation rather than the USA. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, “[...] though he certainly was not lacking clients in London”, he left the city, in Oates’s narrative, to follow the case of ‘the curse’ in Princeton as he is “the world’s sole consulting detective.”<sup>(35)</sup>. What is special, however, is that he surprisingly came to Sinclair’s place at a very late hour of the night with different features Doyle ascribed to him in his narrative. The narrator, for instance, notices that “Doyle had greatly romanticized him and given him ‘near –omnipotent’ powers, as writers of fiction are wont to do, yet Doyle had more or less presented the essence of the detective’s personality—‘uncannily in fact.’ The author had even exposed certain habits of his which he’d hoped were known to himself only...(Here, “Holmes” quite surprised Pearce Van Dick by sliding up his sleeves to reveal lean, sinewy, and badly scarred forearms.) “My cocaine habit, you see—the injection of liquide cocaine into my blood stream, until my more serviceable veins have dried up.”<sup>(36)</sup>. Self-reflexively, as it were, the narrator explained that this detail in the character’s biography is necessary since “[so] narrow is the fictional Holmes, scoring an interest in art, history, politics and music apart from the occasional squeaking of his own fiddle.”<sup>(37)</sup>. He made us understand that because of his addiction to drugs, Holmes was unable to appreciate other fields rather than “cheating” on people about different mysterious cases he used to solve.

In addition, the first person narrator openly adopts the role of a historian writing, in this case, his ‘chronicles’ and expecting that “[f]ellow historians will be choked” at what they will read in them<sup>(38)</sup>. His position as both historian and ‘autobiographer’ grants him a vantage point over previous historians. Engaged in the task of filling in the gaps left by her biographers, Oates’s book unveils in a convincing manner the inefficiency of traditional historiography. The narrator provided answers thanks to being “pationately involved in this

chronicle"<sup>(39)</sup> by having the chance to consult “tons” of family documents. He succeeded, for instance, in finding the cause of Woodrow Wilson’s stroke of May 30, 1906 that is “as all historians concur, was the triumph of his nimesis West; yet the cause of West’s triumph has never been fully ilucidated West’s triumph was but the triumph of the Curse in mortal guise.”<sup>(40)</sup> In fact, Wilson, as Oates portrayed him, possesses a very different self rather than the consevative Christian one he is known for. His fear of losing his position as the head of the university drove him to be limited in unestablished thoughts related to witchcraft, clairvoyance and mesmerism<sup>(41)</sup>. Long thinking that his rival West is involved in “occult practices”, he foresees the inevitable triumph of the former insisting that a kind of conspiracy is being cooked up against him.

Besides this episode in history that the narrator’s fellow historians did not report in their texts, Wilson’s secret meetings with Cybella Peck, his “supernatural” mistress, is the other cause behind his loss of post. His “coward” refusal to kill West in reply to Cybella’s advise led him not only to lose the presidency of the graduate school, but also the woman who taught him the meaning of loyalty<sup>(42)</sup>. His betrayal to his wife reveals Wilson’s reality not as “stiff, unbending, puritanical, and ‘priestly!’” as he is known to both the “world, as to history”; but rather, he was a man with a self “capable of such deliriums of passion” one dares to show to the very woman he calls to be deprived from her right to vote!<sup>(43)</sup> It is not the fear of “doubling the vote” in certain regions, as Wilson claimed to be the real drive of his opposing women suffrage, but the fear of what may follow if “women would run for political office”<sup>(44)</sup> “Imagine”, the narrator—self-consciously— adds, “a female senator! A female President! The United States would be the laughingstock of the world.”<sup>(45)</sup> Wilson’s ‘mysogynist self’ is clear even at his household, the narrator documented that he was so disappointed at being surrounded by women including servants, his daughters, and even his wife. He complained of his house being “a household of females [where] so often he could not breath.”<sup>(46)</sup> He could not even discuss some issues of interest with them for “there are some things too ugly for women to know of [and that] a man’s responsibility is to shield them. No good can come of them knowing all that we must know”<sup>(47)</sup>.

Along with portraying him as possessing a misogynist self, Woodrow Wilson is accused in *The Accursed* of having a ‘racist self’ as an integral part of his identity. In the opening pages of the novel, the narrator relates about occasions when he remained indecisive toward the Ku klax Klan’s lynchings of black Americans: “I - I must –speak—but the issue is not so—simple”, he answered Ruggles, his ‘Negro’ nephew and student<sup>(48)</sup>. In fact, Oates made it known that Wilson had a special history with the blacks in that he refused to welcome Negroes (or darkies, among whom Booker. T. Washington) in the university’s clubs as he pretended being “powerless to modify the law” of private clubs<sup>(49)</sup>. In another occasion when he delivered a speech at Charleston, he offended the audience when he, under a given mysterious spell, warned them that he feared “the United States would never be a true democracy until such time [...] that a Negress resides in the White House.”<sup>(50)</sup> Similarly, in his letters to his wife that the narrator used as evidence, he kept the same racist tone when he wrote: “it is a kind of joke, or leg-pull, that so very black a Negro will speak such a precise British English...”<sup>(51)</sup> He stressed this opinon by thinking of them as objects or machines as they are “of a higher quality generally, & remarkably intelligent.”<sup>(52)</sup> Where before Wilson’s expulsion from the presidency of Princeton University, racism had been a secondary issue in Wilson’s priorities, now it became a national case as the whites are the ones who are enslaved in Oates’s fantastic world. In the Bog Kingdom, where Annabel was taken as a queen of Mr Mayte’s, she recognizes chained slaves that strangely seem white-skinned: “We saw a convict gang toiling by the roadside in shapeless prison clothes and leg-irons - not a one of these men was of Caucasian features but African in descent with flat blunt noses and fleshy lips and yet their skins were chalky-white!- astonishing to the eye, one would thought that the world had turned inside-out and Heaven had drunkenly reversed itself with Hell”<sup>(53)</sup>.



A twenty-first century reader may disagree with the present analysis of Wilson as a historical figure as with Oates's fictional characterization of him. Therefore, and in order to escape all judgements, time, in *The Accursed*, is dissolved for the sake of avoiding being limited and criticized by psychoanalysts, mainly. Time in the novel is made senseless. As Annabel Slade notices: "Hours passed, or days--I was confused in time..."<sup>(54)</sup>. Furthermore, this use of deliberate anachronisms, a commonplace in postmodernist literature, can be read as an ideological tool. Late nineteenth-century writers of historical novels found themselves constricted by the risk of psychological anachronism if they set to analyze or evaluate their characters' inner motives, because the authors' commentary would be informed by their own norms and values<sup>(55)</sup>. However, these strictures are completely banished by Oates's free, self-conscious use of anachronism, which allows her to launch judgements from the point of view of her times' own moral standards. Time and history in Wilson's opinion are not "fixed points as we know them to be, but something called -[he] thinks the term is 'relative.'"<sup>(56)</sup>.

The adoption of fantasy and postmodern psychology while writing fiction is, as Amy J. Elias asserts, meant to comment on present events in a contravention to the elementary tenet of historiography that relates the stuffings of history only to the past<sup>(57)</sup>. Likewise, this strategy endows *The Accursed* with a more fundamental ideological position. As Elias puts forth, "postmodernist historical novels break up the teleological line of history [...] in order to unmask the ideological assumptions and cultural dominations resulting from emplotted, linear historical storytelling."<sup>(58)</sup>. In a sarcastic criticism of liberal politics in the USA, Oates combined fantastic moments with the real life of Woodrow Wilson for the same end of revealing true 'selves' of the president that led him to think in strangely specific ways toward various people and issues in the American history. Aside from critiques of his bigoted, authoritarian self, he seems to be wholeheartedly despised in Oates's book mainly for his dictatorial regime that violated the American constitution and pushed the nation into a dirty WWI. What is known in history as the Zimmerman Telegram, in which Germany tried to persuade Mexico to enter into an alliance against America, and that pushed Wilson on April 2, 1917 to ask Congress to declare war on Germany, is never referred to in Oates's narrative. Instead, it is made clear that her objective at focusing on the above-mentioned aspects of Wilson's personality, as the only cause of the nation's involvement in the war, opposes most historians' contemplation.

Going a step further, and this time as a reconciliatory gesture toward history and its relateness, Oates made Reverend Slade, as a fictional mentor of the historical character of Woodrow Wilson, inherit the upper class legacy of slavery, pride and egotism. Returning to right the wrongs made upon his figure and his friend's by history itself, he denounces the realities historians have missed to record in their writings about the source of not only the Slades family but of the whole nation. They are the origin of the 'curse' that he enlisted in his confessions (again to parody St. Augustin's) entitled "The Covenant". He wrote:

"FROM YOUR DAYS OF SLAVE-HOLDING UNTIL NOW YOUR GREAT FORTUNE WHICH IS THE LORD'S BLESSING HARVESTED FROM THE BENT AND BROKEN BACKS OF FACTORY WORKERS, MILL-WORKERS, DUMB AND STAMMERING IMMIGRANTS MISSING FINGERS, TOES, EYE YET YOU HAVE TRIED TO TRICK YOUR GOD, YOU HAVE TRIED TO DISGUISE YOUR SIN AS IF IT WERE A MERE CRIME..."<sup>(59)</sup>.

As another deliberate, self-conscious attempt to 'disguise the sin', Oates chose to write the reverend's confessions in capital letters. Not only does this choice target to stress the importance of the document as the denouement of the plot, but, also, to challenge modern typologists' conviction that "all-caps" – or all-capitals—are less readable and legible than lower-case texts. It is Oates's particular way of self-reflexivity to indirectly cheer the reader to closely examine the text in opposition to a former section, where she, through the narrator, advised the audience not to bother themselves to read since the episode is mere unnecessary details.

### Conclusion:

An analysis of the features that make of *The Accursed* a special case in the North American tradition of postmodern historiographic metafiction reveals how they provide the novel with a sharpened ideological commitment. The thoroughly documented contextualization of the plots in a well-known historical period studied by generations of historians, together with the adoption of the role of heterodiegetic narrator by a twentieth-century historian allows for a radicalization of the critiques of traditional notions of History and historiography generally developed by the American postmodern historical novel. Thus, Oates's work goes beyond the confusion of fiction and documented factuality within a self-conscious narrative frame that has become conventional in the American trend. The latter that ceases from regarding History as the outlet of truth, then so much the better, since the belief in the neutrality of historical writing is completely lost. Also, the postmodernist strong assumption in the possibility of revisiting all signifying systems in culture as forms of discourse permits for wider integration of fantastic elements within the very truism of history. History and literature provide the intertexts in the novel examined here, but there is no question of "a hierarchy"; they both make and interpret US past and present realities. This final assumption comes to corroborate Hutcheon's assertion that one of the major intents of historiographic metafiction is not to "deny the existence of the past [but to] question whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains."<sup>(60)</sup>

Knowing about the past in Oates's text needs extra-textual material; i.e, fantasy, but also other elements that once incorporated into historical texts about historical selves, they can reveal more realities about them and, more importantly, about the ideologies behind. Parody and self-reflexivity prove to be among the most important means of resistance to prior historical articulations due to recent works as Linda Hutcheon's. As a Canadian writer skeptical of her country's possession of a history, she believes that all literature is an unsurpassed site for historic 'deformation and reformation'. Moreover, in writings of this kind, ideological resistance in thematics almost inevitably goes along with textual resistance in style and strategy.

Moreover, this analysis stresses the need for revisiting the polarization deviding the two disciplines of history and fiction together with the stabilizing and unifying vision of the human self. Interestingly, these norms are not limited to the historical self only, but rather, they apply to the majority of human issues of debate. Ways employed in different narratives by Joyce Carol Oates to portray the human sense of self is part of an ongoing research and will allow us to reflect on whether there are globalizing tendencies in self studies that transcend physical and mental expectations toward metaphysical and mysterious possibilities, or whether local and timely horizons will always prevail. There is a great deal of work still to be done in this rich, underexplored field.

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<<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-devil-and-woodrow-wilson-an-interview-with-joyce-carol-oates>. Accessed: 30/01/2016, p 9.

2- The post-war American novel: The period in time from the end of World War II up until, roughly, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the publication of some of the most popular works in American history such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer.

3-"identity fable": This theory, originally, illustrates how teens do not differentiate between themselves and others, leading them to think that others are as obsessed with them as they are obsessed with themselves. As applied to intellectuals passing from the age of 'modernist individualism' to that of 'postmodernist collectivism', the term refers to the intellectual's mental state being uprooted from the present reality.

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- 15-Hutcheon, “‘Historiographic’”, op.cit, p 4.
- 16- Ibid, p 4.
- 17-Hutcheon, *The Politics*, op.cit, p 64.
- 18- Ku Klux klan: commonly called the KKK or the klan, is an American supremacist hate group that used terrorism against groups or individuals whom they opposed including blacks, immigrants, catholics, Nordics Their aim is to purify the American society from strangers.
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- 60-** Hutcheon, “‘Historiographic,’” op.cit, p 19-20.