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## Infanticide and the Symbolism of Evil in Joyce Carol Oates's "Dear Husband"

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### Abstract

In 2001, a Texan housewife, Andrea Yates, drowned her five children in a bathtub, claiming that she had killed them to save them from evil. Her life sentence for murder was later suspended, and Yates was transferred to a psychiatric facility. In 2009, Joyce Carol Oates published the short story "Dear Husband," inspired by the Yates case. The author structured her story as a letter which Lauri Lynn writes to her husband to confess to the murder of their five children before she takes her life. The aim of this article is to analyze the story using the categories elaborated by Paul Ricœur to define evil and its symbolism and to try to answer the question: is Andrea Yates/Lauri Lynn a villain or a victim?

**Keywords:** Joyce Carol Oates, the Yates Case, Paul Ricœur, evil, infanticide

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### 1. Introduction

After Andrea Yates's life sentence for the murder of her five children, Jennifer Jones inquired: "will she be portrayed as a villain or a victim" (101). Over the years, the Yates case has aroused a great deal of discussion about her culpability. Also, her lawsuit, which ended with a life sentence in 2003, an absolution on the grounds of insanity in 2006, and the transfer in 2007 to the psychiatric facility of Kerrville (Texas) (Hails 134), reflects the difficulty for judicial authority and public opinion to judge such a crime.

Andrea Pia Yates was a thirty-six-year-old housewife married to the NASA aerospace engineer Russell "Rusty" Yates. The couple had five children: Noah, John, Paul, Luke and Mary (Bienstock 451). The eldest was seven years old, the youngest only six months. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, while her husband was at work, Andrea drowned her children in the home bathtub, and afterwards she called Russell and the police, confessing immediately to her crime which was, in her words, "a mother's final loving act of mercy" (Buddenbaum 83). The woman believed, indeed, that her children were possessed by the devil, and by killing them, she reckoned she could bring them back to their original state of grace (Ewing and

McCann 235). Yates had been suffering from post-partum depression after the birth of her third child<sup>1</sup> so she had gotten close to the doctrine of Reverend Peter Woroniecki (Buddenbaum 82) which had affected her to the extent that she had started being obsessed by religion. It is a common opinion that among the causes of her depression was the behavior of her husband Russell and his “controlling nature, desire for more children, rigid religious beliefs, and perceived indifference to his wife’s depression” (Ewing and McCann 232–233).

In 2009, Joyce Carol Oates published the short story “Dear Husband,” which was inspired by the Yates case. Oates’s tendency to use facts in her novels or short stories can be detected in many other works she has written, where she has chronicled contemporary America through facts and people that shocked the public opinion. The subject matter of these stories earned her the label of “gothic writer” and the accusation of putting too much violence in her writing, to which she replied that “when people say there is too much violence in Joyce Carol Oates [...] what they are saying is there is too much reality in life” (Milazzo 89). Moreover, she declared: “I wish the world were a better place, but I wouldn’t be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me” (Wagner xii).

The writer’s disposition towards real characters is two-faced: some works have been written with the aim of bearing witness to the life of those who cannot speak for themselves anymore,<sup>2</sup> others with the intention of exploring the darkest side of the human conscience, especially that of some famous American serial killers.<sup>3</sup> What is, therefore, Oates’s stance on the Yates case? Is “Dear Husband” a way to give Andrea Yates a new voice and to condone her crime? Or is it a tool to explain, in a surgical way, how a mother can kill all her children one by one? In other words, is Yates a villain or a victim?

The aim of this article is to analyze the fictional confession of the protagonist of Oates’s short-story according to the theory of evil developed by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1913–2005) in his essay *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), where he studies how human will is challenged by the enigma of evil. Ricœur examines the seminal myths of evil in the Western culture and exposes how evil as a limit-situation shatters “all illusions of autonomous sovereignty” and exposes people’s experience of finitude and fallibility (Kearney 198). The same feelings are experienced by the narrator in Oates’s story, and they are – most likely – the cause of her “evil” gesture.

## 2. The Confession of Guilt

“Dear Husband” is structured as a suicide note which Lauri Lynn, a twenty-eight-year-old housewife, writes to her husband Loell after she has murdered their five children and before she takes her life. Therefore, it is a confession of evil, what Ricœur – whose themes have been associated more than once

with Oates's<sup>4</sup> – defines as the “utterance of man about himself” (1967, 4). The confession communicates “the triple character of the experience [...]: blindness, equivocation, scandalousness” and thus the fault, “is brought into the light of speech” (7). The experience confessed by the penitent is “a blind” one, governed by “absurdity, suffering and anguish” (7), so it needs a language that can reveal the disconcerting character of alienation.

Lauri Lynn clarifies from the beginning that “I am confessing this crime only to you, dear husband for it is you I have wronged” (Oates 318). It is evident from the very first lines that the woman holds an erroneous perception of her real guilt, because she admits that “it was my failure as a wife and the mother of your children that is my true crime” (318). Therefore, she is not confessing to be a murderer, since she does not see it as a crime, but to be a failure as a wife and a mother. At the beginning of the letter, Lauri Lynn seeks her husband's forgiveness (“you will forgive me and you will pray for me [...] as you alone have the right to condemn me”) since, as Ricœur writes, there can be forgiveness “only where we can accuse someone of something, presume him to be or declare him guilty” (2004, 460). The only acts that can be indicted are those “that are imputable to an agent who holds himself to be their genuine author” (460).

One can also self-ascribe themselves with a fault, a condition that, as the philosopher claims, implies an admission of guilt: that linguistic and performative act where the subject takes on themselves the responsibility for an accusation (461). In this case, the only admission made by the protagonist is her failure, not the evil *par excellence*, “the evil that man does to man”: murder (464). The notion of guilt, according to Ricœur, is not only the transgression of a rule, or the harm done to someone else with all its consequences (461), but most of all a feeling that makes us imputable for our actions (460). It is a feeling clearly absent in the protagonist of the story, except for what concerns the way she perceives herself as an unfitting mother and wife. The feeling of guilt can be factorized in a set of key concepts that are contained in the confession of the woman: impurity, shame, failure and punishment.

### 3. The Symbolism of Impurity

The concept of impurity runs through the entire letter. Impurity is a stain, a “quasi material something that infects as a sort of filth” (Ricœur 1967, 25), and a person “need not be the author of the evil to feel himself burdened by its weight and the weight of its consequences” (100). The stain is embodied by Lauri Lynn herself, guilty of passing down to her children and to the house her physical and moral imperfection. “These are not beautiful children, I am afraid. For their mother was not a beautiful woman” (Oates 325), she confesses, and she eventually admits: “[...] the children had not turned right, that is the simple fact. [...]

These children, who did not show their deformities to the eye, except sometimes Loell Jr., when he twisted his mouth as he did, and made that bellowing sound. I am a bad mother, I confess this. For a long time I did not wish to acknowledge this fact, in my pride” (324). This is an admission that Andrea Yates made right after the murder to the police. Questioned about the reasons for her gesture, the woman answered that the children “weren’t developing correctly” and that they had behavioral and learning problems (O’Malley 15).

In her short story, Oates uses such details to create a vivid picture of these children “fretting as usual, for a kind of devil would come into them” (2009, 318) and who “push at my hands, they whimper and kick” (320). The learning problems are associated with the eldest son, Loell Jr., who is not “a fast learner,”<sup>5</sup> yet Lauri Lynn reckons she is only partially culpable for this child’s flaws, since “[i]t was God’s wish to cause our firstborn to be as he was” (317).

The house is imperfect and “impure” as the children, a detail that matches reality. When the police arrived at the Yates’ after the murder, they reported that everything looked dirty, especially a beige carpet that appeared “severely stained” (Spencer 2). In the short story as well, “the bathrooms are not clean. The toilets cannot be kept clean. Beneath the cellar steps, there is something so shameful I could not bring myself to reveal it to you” (Oates 319–320). The secret hidden under the cellar steps is mentioned several times throughout the letter, and it is revealed only in the finale, in a grotesque and sadly ironic note. The stain that Lauri Lynn has passed down to her children and the house is something she tries to erase with all her might, “tearful and in a fury but the stains will not come out” (323). The origin of the guilt lies in the fact that for Lauri Lynn, as well as for Andrea Yates, “all my life here [...] has been our family” (317). The Yates family displays all the features of the typical suburban family: breadwinner husband, wife as a full-time homemaker, in the most classic definition of gender roles (Hawes and Nybakken 164–165). Suzy Spencer writes that this family fits in an even more specific category, that of the NASA employees who reside in the suburban area of Dallas, who became over of the years “family-oriented Republicans,” whose wives “stayed home and cared for the children, while their husbands worked 100-hour weeks at NASA” (5). The role of housewife can easily lead to a burnout that is caused not only by the economic dependency of the wife, but most of all by the lack of motivating factors in her life (Oakley 223). This condition intertwines with maternal ambivalence, a feeling that is shared, at different levels, by all mothers: the coexistence of feelings of love and hate towards one’s own children (Parker 1). Devotion, as Elizabeth Badinter claims, does not guarantee successful mothering, because it is essential “for the relationship between mother and child to be truly successful” that “she find pleasure in it” (275).

The testimonies on the conduct of Andrea Yates as a mother and housewife show the image of a woman who cooked, sewed, baked cakes, and homeschooled her children. In short, “she did her best to be the perfect wife and mother”

(Buddenbaum 82). Yet, although Oates recognizes such attempts, she describes a character far from complying with her task with joy and happiness. The author imagines the growing anguish of a life that is always the same day by day, and with no other prospect but to keep cleaning a house that seems inexorably stained, or to try to tame creatures who, as often happens in Oates's works, make their mother "afraid of their children as they watch them grow into separate beings whose nature they can never understand or control" (Allen 148). Lauri Lynn's daily life is described as follows:

The children must be scrubbed if they have soiled themselves in the night and they must be readied for school except for Paulie and the baby and then there is the return from school, noise and excitement, it is a very long day like a corridor in a great motel where you cannot see the end of it, for the lighting is poor, and the rooms are strangely numbered. Mommy is so tired! Which of those doors in the corridor is Mommy's door, is not certain. For the day has no end. (Oates 323)

The anguish of never-ending days adds up to domestic violence. Although there is no evidence that Russell Yates abused or beat his wife (Ewing and McCann 235), Oates blames the protagonist's husband to mistreating her, verbally and physically. But the protagonist does not recognize it as a fault or a crime, because her husband's violence is an educational tool:

I know that such terrible words would never erupt from your mouth, dear husband, except for me. And never would you strike a woman. My jaw still hurts but it is a good hurt. A waking-up hurt. You said, Lauri Lynn what the hell do you do all day long, look at this house. You have nothing to do but take care of the children and this house and look at this house, Lauri Lynn. You are a failure as a mother as you are a failure as a wife, Lauri Lynn. (320)

Such a pattern of "abuse or neglect" (Ewing and McCann 235), which Doctor Philip Resnick, one of the surveyors of Yates's mental condition during the trial, ruled out from Andrea and Russell's relationship, seems to be a partial explanation for the psychological state of the woman. A further negative influence might have been that of the already mentioned Reverend Woroniecki, who was greatly admired by Russell Yates, especially for the part of his doctrine concerning family. Indeed, Woroniecki claimed that man should be the head of the family and the task of the wife was to help the husband and raise his children (Stowers 241). Oates devotes a limited space to the figure of the Reverend (whose name in the story is Reverend Hewett), but she describes accurately the religious delusion of the protagonist. Lauri Lynn opens her letter with a quotation from the Gospels: "Let no man cast asunder what God hath brought together" (Oates 316). It is the formula used in the Christian wedding rite, and it explains how the protagonist has always been convinced that man cannot separate what God has brought together. This is a proof of her "dependence on the power of the sacred" (Ricoeur 1967, 6).

Her delusional discourse aims at explaining to her husband that the crime she has committed was guided and wanted by God, as he was the one telling her what to do: “I am so grateful, each step has been urged on me, by God. No step of our lives is without God” (Oates 318). Reverend Hewett stays in the background and listens to the pain of Lauri Lynn. He comforts her with the precept that “God will not send us any burdens greater than we can bear” (321). This is not enough to avoid the tragedy: in her altered mental state, the woman immolates her children and reckons she has acted “as God has instructed” (321).

#### 4. Shame, Failure, and Punishment

A feeling that pervades the entire narration is shame. It is causally related to the concept of impurity, but it does not stem from the self-awareness of failure. Impurity, indeed, is brought about by the gaze of the other. According to Ricœur, “it is always in the sight of other people who excite the feeling of shame and under the influence of the word which says what is pure and impure that a stain is defilement” (1967, 40). The protagonist of “Dear Husband” is surrounded by gazes of shame, some of them are remarkably close, others extremely far. The most obvious one belongs to her husband Loell: “And yet in your eyes, dear husband, I see that scorn. It is the scorn of the male, it cannot be contested” (Oates 322). What her mother-in-law sees is another source of shame. In the actual case, Russell’s mother Dora had often helped Andrea with the children after the birth of the last one, and she rushed to the house when she learnt that her grandchildren had been killed by their mother (O’Malley 2). Her fictional counterpart is, at least according to the protagonist, the ideal judge of all her flaws: the inability to keep the children neat and teach them table manners (“The children eat so fast, and are so messy, Mother McKeon crinkled her nose saying, you’d think these children are starving, and nobody taught them table manners, look at the messes they make”) and more generally her scarce penchant for being a good wife and mother:

Mother McKeon said, she did not mean to be harsh but was kindly in her speech, Can’t you control these children, Lauri Lynn? It should not be that hard, you are their mother. Your mother looks at me with such disappointment, I do not blame her of course. Your mother has a right to expect so much better of Loell McKeon’s wife, all of the family has a right to expect this for you are their shining son. Now in her face there is disappointment like a creased glove someone has crushed in his hand. (Oates 318–319)

The triggers to her shame are both present: the gaze (“Your mother looks at me with such disappointment”) and the word (“she did not mean to be harsh but she was kindly in her speech”). The same elements can be traced in a much more distant and indefinite gaze, that of strangers:

In the 7-Eleven if there are teenaged boys outside, I am ashamed to walk past. These boys jeering and mocking as boys had done with my friend Nola who weighed 150 pound when we were girls. Look at the cow, look at the fat cow, look at the udders on that cow, moo-cow, moo-cow, moooo-cow like hyenas the boys laughed for nothing is so funny to them as a female who is not attractive. (Oates 322)

Their word is not a "kind" one because it turns Lauri Lynn into a zoomorphic creature when they tease her imitating the verse of a cow. Yet teenagers are not the only strangers whose judgement she dreads. The shame, after the crime, is not caused by what she has done, but by the filth the police will see entering the house: "I am ashamed of what the police officers will discover. The boys' rooms are not clean. The boys' bedclothes are stained. There is a harsh smell of the baby's diapers and of bleach" (320). The gaze of the officers will be even worse, along with the comments of her husband: "To the police officers who are men like yourself you will say with your angry laugh, there is not a clean glass in this house, if one of the police officers requests a glass of water" (325). It is not a coincidence that Oates made a reference to clean glasses, since on the day of the murder, while Andrea was staked out at home by the police for a preliminary interrogation, Russell was kept from entering; he remained in the garden, waiting for updates on the situation. When an agent asked him where he could find a clean glass, the man replied that he would be lucky to find one. The agent looked for a glass but, as Russell had predicted, he could not find a clean one (O'Malley 9). It seems reasonable to think that Oates was aware of this detail when she wrote the story.

All these gazes of men are nothing compared to the shame Lauri Lynn feels before God. She writes that "Jesus was disgusted with Lauri Lynn, you could not blame Him" (Oates 321). To be "before God" is, for Ricœur, the category that determines the notion of sin (1967, 50). The primordial sense of God's gaze exposes the truth of the sinner's situation and provides the ethical judgement about one's existence (101). It is only God, or his projection in Lauri Lynn's mind, that encourages her to get rid of her impurity and her shame. This gaze dictates her a line of conduct to undo her mistakes: "Jesus said to me, It is true that you are a bad mother but there is a way: 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.' There is a way to be forgiven and cleansed" (Oates 323). The words that the woman imagines hearing from God mention the symbolism of the stain ("cleansed") and impurity. The way to delete one's stain is what Ricœur defines as "ritual suppression" (1967, 35), something that "marks out a ceremonial space" which stands "for a total action addressed to the person taken as an undivided whole" (35). Both in reality and in Oates's story, such a rite is symbolized by the drowning the five children in the bathtub. The mode chosen by Andrea Yates can be linked to ablution, to the water that purifies everything and washes away the sins. Ablution is, according to Ricœur, not "a simple washing" but "already a partial and fictive



act,” a “symbolic washing” that “can be affected by a diversity of equivalent acts which mutually symbolize one another” (1967, 35).

The account of the drowning is briefly mentioned in the letter, complying with the principle that “the anticipation of violence is Oates’s great strength, not the account of actual violence, which is often anticlimactic” (Allen 143). The murder is narrated in a few lines which are followed by the realization that the woman deserves to be punished to complete her atonement. In Ricœur’s view, “if a man is punished because he sins, he ought to be punished *as* he sins,” and the dread of punishment “reveals an ethical rather than a physical aim” (1967, 42). Andrea Yates told the agents that arrested her that only her execution for the murder of her children would save them from the evil she had inside (Buddenbaum 84). Therefore, she knew, as reported by Resnick, that killing her children was legally wrong, but she believed it was morally right, due to her religious beliefs (Ewing and McCann 235). Law, in this respect, “is a ‘pedagogue’ which helps the penitent to determine how he is a sinner” (Ricœur 1967, 59). The jury examining the Yates case decided that Andrea was guilty and not insane because she had called 911, covered the bodies of the children with a sheet, and had appeared calm while confessing to the crime (Ayes 117), thus she knew “her actions were wrong from a rational perspective” (118).

## 5. Conclusion

The end of the letter is paradoxical, considering that it is the confession of the murderer of five children. Lauri Lynn has revealed without any hesitation the reasons for an event that will undoubtedly disrupt her husband’s life, but there is another secret she hints at several times throughout the narration, and it is perhaps the thing that arouses the worst shame in her. She eventually reveals that:

[...] I beg you to forgive me for the heavy casserole dish hidden beneath the cellar stairs, that is badly scorched and disgusting for not even steel wool could scrape away the burnt macaroni and cheese, now in cold water it has been soaking since Thanksgiving. I could not hide it in the trash to dispose of it for it is a gift from your mother, it is Corning Ware and expensive and might yet be scoured clean and made usable again, by another’s hand. (Oates 325–326)

Such a detail in the closure of the story is not only a grotesque note typical of Oates’s style, especially in the narratives of life in the suburbs,<sup>6</sup> but also the will to express her judgement on the Yates case. Is it possible that a woman, after the murder of her children, can really care so much about a dish hidden under the stairs? Can such a woman be aware of the difference between good and bad? Hence, she must have been unaware of what she was doing. Therefore, can Oates’s story be considered as the absolution of Andrea Yates? Does the writer depict

her character as a villain or a victim? Has she given Andrea Yates a new voice with the goal of "translating that mute suffering so that readers are moved by it even when they do not fully understand it is her aim" (Wagner xi)? As usual, the author of many works that remind her readers of "the sheer amount of violence in America" (Allen 143), skillfully blurs her personal judgement and lets the social and cultural context that surrounds both her villains and her victims speak: it is what generates them, and it is that context that the reader must examine to decide who is innocent and who is guilty.

Dealing with the theme of domestic violence through a true crime story undoubtedly turns out to be a way to bring it to the public's attention, lending it an authenticity that justifies Oates's claim that reality – and not her writing – is "too violent." Joyce Carol Oates's long and prolific body of work – with its continuous "interplay between fiction and reality" (Boesky 481) – is a perennial springboard for questions and debate. As Roland Barthes states, "[...] the author conceives of literature as an end, the world restores it to him as a means: and it is in this perpetual inconclusiveness that the author rediscovers the word [...] since literature represents it as a question – never, finally, as an answer" (149).

## Notes

- 1 According to Susan Ayres (2006, 102), women who had suffered from previous incidents of post-partum depression are at a greater risk of relapse with another pregnancy.
- 2 The most famous examples are the three novels *Black Water* (1993) on the Chappaquiddick Incident, *Blonde* (2000) on the life of Marilyn Monroe, and *My Sister, My Love* (2009) on the murder of the little beauty queen JonBenét Ramsey.
- 3 The novels and short stories inspired by the serial killers are: "Where Are You Going, Where Have you Been?" (1996) on Charles Schmid (also known as "The Pied Piper of Tucson"), "Last Days" (1984) on the Jewish student Richard Wisnietzky who killed rabbi Morris Adler in Detroit and then took his own life, *The Triumph of the Spider Monkey* (1977) on Charles Manson, and *Zombie* (1995) on the cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer. More recently, Oates has explored the darkest side of the poet Robert Frost in the short story "Lovely, Dark, Deep" (2014).
- 4 See Randi M. Rezendes's dissertation *Articulating American Evil in the Wonderland Quartet: Joyce Carol Oates and the Writings of Paul Ricœur*, defended in 2008 at the Bridgewater State College (Massachusetts, USA).
- 5 As Carlton Stowers writes in the book *Death in a Texas Desert and Other True Crime Stories from the Dallas Observer* the one with learning problems was the third child, Paul, who did not start talking as fast as his siblings.

- 6 The best examples are two other “confessions,” the already mentioned *My Sister, My Love* and the less recent *Expensive People* (1969), where the teenager Richard Everett, who lives in a rich suburb of Detroit, confesses to the murder of his mother Nada, a famous writer, before he commits suicide.

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