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## **How to Turn a Forgotten Figure of American History into a National and Gender Emblem: Joyce Carol Oates's Treatment of Mary Jo Kopechne in *Black Water***

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**Abstract:** On July 18, 1969, Senator Edward Kennedy was involved in a car accident on Chappaquiddick Island (Massachusetts). While Kennedy managed to get out of his car, the woman who was riding with him, Mary Jo Kopechne, whom he had met at a party a few hours before, died from asphyxiation. The aim of this paper is to show how the American author Joyce Carol Oates used this story, setting it in the 1990s, for her 1992 novel *Black Water*. Through the character of Kelly Kelleher, the writer builds a national and gender emblem using Kopechne as a springboard. The final aim of the operation is to highlight the contemporary condition of women and to “bear witness” for those who cannot speak for themselves anymore.

**Keywords:** Oates; Kennedy; Chappaquiddick Incident; Women; Gender; Female Condition.

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On the evening of 18 July, 1968, on Chappaquiddick Island (Massachusetts), Senator Edward Kennedy was driving his Oldsmobile to reach the ferry that would bring him to Edgartown. In the car with him, there was Mary Jo Kopechne, twenty-nine years old, former assistant of Robert Kennedy during his campaign. Edward Kennedy and Kopechne had met that night at a party and they had decided to go back to their hotels together.<sup>1</sup>

Once they came by Dike Bridge, a small bridge that crosses the Poucha Pond, the car fell into a canal, plunging almost immediately. Kennedy managed to escape from the window, while the woman, trapped in the car, died some hours later.<sup>2</sup> The Senator always maintained that he had tried several times to save her. Anyway, he reported the accident only ten hours later, and in the inquiry of the district attorney's office of Edgartown, he pleaded guilty of leaving the scene of the accident.<sup>3</sup> He was



sentenced to two months in jail, but the injunction was never applied.<sup>4</sup>

In the hundreds of articles and books written on the accident, many theories have been elaborated to justify the Senator's behavior: an affair between him and Kopechne, the fact that she was probably driving the car,<sup>5</sup> or that Kennedy was drunk. However, the element that joins everything that has been written about the Chappaquiddick Incident is the absence of Mary Jo Kopechne. Differently from many victims of similar tragedies involving public figures, in this case there has not been any investigation on the person, or anybody keeping her memory alive telling who she was and how she died. In his exhaustive volume on the accident, Leo Damore recounts that Edward Kennedy, filing his report, confessed that he could only pronounce but not write Mary Jo's last name. Moreover, Damore provides the only information we possess about her: she was born in 1940 in Wilkes-Barre (Pennsylvania) and she graduated in Business Administration at the Coldwell College for Women (New Jersey). She taught for a year at the Mission of St. Jude (Alabama) and later she entered the staff of the Senator of Florida, George Smothers. In 1964, she worked for Robert Kennedy in the "Boiler Room" during his campaign, and then the company "Matt Reese Associates" had hired her. Kopechne lived in Georgetown with three girls and she was single.<sup>6</sup> Her personality is described as that of "a serious, quiet girl. She wasn't a flippant type person."<sup>7</sup> Not even the commemorative speech by Robert Kennedy's widow, Ethel, adds new elements to this picture:

Mary Jo was a sweet wonderful girl. She worked for Bobby for years and

she was in the boiler room, the phone room used for delegate counts during the campaign. Only the great ones worked there and she was just terrific. She often came out to the house and she was the one who stayed up all night typing Bobby's speech on Vietnam. She was a wonderful person.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Last Brother*, Joe McGinnis does not report any biographical element about the woman, but he only observes that she had a very active social life in Washington. She had ended a long relationship with a Navy official right before the party in Edgartown, so, both she and the Senator were "in a rather unsettled emotional condition."<sup>9</sup>

Robert Sherrill, in his novel biography *The Last Kennedy*, only indulges in *post-mortem* details, describing Mary Jo's corpse, and the way she was dressed, pointing out the fact that she was not wearing her underwear.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the most clamorous absence is that within the memoir that Edward Kennedy published in 2009: *True Compass, A Memoir*. The volume is made up of five-hundred pages, only five of which are devoted to the Chappaquiddick Incident. In these pages, the elderly Senator recalls, exactly forty years later, what happened that night, declaring, "what I am left with now are mostly memories of memories, and even those older memories lacked clarity, as records of the time show."<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy gives his version of the incident, he justifies himself, he is self-indulgent, and he writes Mary Jo's name for the first time only on the third page of his account. He does not tell anything about her, except that "[w]e reminisced about



Bobby, and we both became emotional,”<sup>12</sup> and eventually he admits that Mary Jo “was an innocent young woman who had done nothing more than being loyal to my brother and his cause.”<sup>13</sup> Kennedy’s memoir is the ideal answer to the people who accused him of murdering the woman “the same as if he put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger,”<sup>14</sup> but he does not add anything to her figure. In fact, we do not know who Mary Jo Kopechne was. The way the Chappaquiddick Incident has been recounted over the years embodies the triad that, according to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, is the ideal premise for oblivion (*oubli*): “omission, blindness and negligence.”<sup>15</sup> Although it is not correct to define it as “revisionism,” the erasure of Kopechne “does not stem from the pathology of forgetting, nor even from ideological manipulation,”<sup>16</sup> but from a selective choice of what it was convenient to keep of that accident. As Eleanor Clift wrote in her review of *True Compass*, “[...] the image of a Kennedy leaving a woman to drown seemed to epitomize the inequality of the sexes.”<sup>17</sup> All these considerations led Oates to finally give a voice and a story to Mary Jo Kopechne: to save her character from oblivion and to make it an example of the female condition.

When the novel *Black Water* was published in 1992, Oates was questioned about her reasons to write about the Chappaquiddick Incident. Surprisingly, the author declared that “The Senator in *Black Water* shouldn’t be mistaken for Ted Kennedy, Kelly Kelleher isn’t a pseudonym for Mary Jo Kopechne, and this brief tale is not about Chappaquiddick at all.”<sup>18</sup>

The necessity to tell that story again was raised by various events that, in the

early 1990s, had dominated the national news, highlighting “a climate particularly inhospitable for women.”<sup>19</sup> Among these events, there was William Kennedy Smith’s,<sup>20</sup> Edward Kennedy’s nephew, trial for rape.

In 2005, Gavin Cologne-Brookes unveiled the writer’s worksheets in the monograph *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, showing how it was not her intention to underline the “Kennedy-connection” in the novel.<sup>21</sup> What she really wanted to convey through *Black Water* “are ideas, the issues – guilt/responsibility, denial/confession.”<sup>22</sup>

The concept of responsibility is largely analyzed by Ricoeur in *The Just*, where he claims that it is defined “by the obligation to make up or to compensate for the tort one has caused through one’s own fault,” and “[it] extends as far as does our capacity to do harm.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, there was not any compensation for the tort committed, although somebody compared the Senator to a murderer. Oates commented on this definition saying that “[i]t’s just an extreme thing to say. I would never, never say anything like this... We know what murder is. Murder is premeditated and deliberate. At the very, very most this would be involuntary manslaughter, if you had a prosecutor who would prosecute.”<sup>24</sup>

Lacking a recognition of responsibility, the only way to compensate for the harm done to the victim is through memory, since “the duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memories to an other than self.”<sup>25</sup> The duty of memory, which was only partially absolved by the people who wrote about the Chappaquiddick Incident, and not by the person who caused Kopechne’s death, implies the duty to pay



a debt to the victim, since “among those others to whom we are indebted, the moral priority belongs to the victims.”<sup>26</sup> Memory requires not only the acknowledgement that these people are dead, but most of all the recognition of the fact that they once had existed, paying the debt with them and “inventorying” their heritage<sup>27</sup>: a debt that is paid by the writer through the memory of a forcedly forgotten figure. The heritage left by Kopechne is the warning for all the women to flee the power relations with men. The dedication of the novel, “For the Kellys,” is for those who are “strong women, but each to different degrees, is victimized.”<sup>28</sup> A disquieting anticipation of the Clinton-Lewinsky case, which happened only a few years later.

Oates started writing *Black Water* on the wake of a Kennedy scandal, although she did not want to write explicitly about the Kennedys.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, she retrieved the timeworn Chappaquiddick Incident because she was fascinated by the image “of the drowning girl/trapped girl in the car, so many hours.”<sup>30</sup> However, she chose not to recount the accident as it happened, in its actual space-time collocation, but to set it in the 1990s and on a fictional island in Maine, Grayling Island. The party attended by the main character, Kelly Kelleher, where she meets the Senator (whose name is never revealed throughout the novel) is not part of a regatta, but it is a typical Fourth of July celebration.

The narration, in the 154 pages that *Black Water* consists of, does not follow a linear path, but after an incipit in *medias res*, where the car starts plunging into the black water of the title, it proceeds with memories and intuitions that reconstruct the whole biography of the protagonist.

Oates uses several styles and genres that allow her to recreate not only the character of Mary Jo/ Kelly but also to delineate “more aspects of American culture,”<sup>31</sup> the historical events, the politics, the culture, and what it meant to be a young woman in the 1990s. All this to realize that, with few variations with respect to the past, women keep on existing in an ancillary position. In this way, Kelly becomes the emblem of the women of her generation, albeit she is not an exceptional character, but a common girl with common issues (emotional, of self-esteem, eating disorders, etc.). The author did not want to produce a feminist novel, since “Oates does not always depict women as feminist role models.”<sup>32</sup> Her aim was to write a work that dealt with the female condition without being militant, and which explained the power relations between men and women as seen through the eyes of a character that only in the fiction can find her voice.

When Oates “resurrected” Kopechne’s character, she possessed only few and mostly useless biographical information. Mary Jo was a common woman, and Oates took advantage of this fact to make her embody the hopes, the problems and the life of the women of her generation. Her life, poor in exceptional events, becomes the ideal canvas to depict a generational, and most of all national, emblem. Although the situation reconstructed in *Black Water* is outside any American collocation, power relations are indeed universal. The author highlights more than once that Kelly is “an American girl.” The formula “you’re an American girl” is recurrent throughout the novel to point out that self-determination, a feature of the American people (and it is probably



not by chance that the story is set on the Fourth of July, the date of American Independence), reflects on the young women of this country as well. The idea of being the owner of one's own existence pervades every apparition of this mantra that Kelly repeats obsessively when her moral is high:

So radiant and assured there on the beach, wearing her new glamorously dark sunglasses the lenses scientifically treated to eliminate ultraviolet rays, and she knew she looked good, she was not a beautiful girl but sometimes you know, it's your time and you know, no happiness quite like that happiness. You're an American girl, you know.<sup>33</sup>

Alternatively, to highlight how the idea of self-determination is only an illusion, something that one simply *believes* she can choose to do:

*You're an American girl you love your life.  
You love your life, you believe you have chosen it.*<sup>34</sup>

Even in the end, in the moment of death, the mantra is used as a posthumous assessment of the life the main character has lived:

You love the life you've lived, there is no other.  
You love the life you've lived, you're an American girl. You believe you have chosen it.<sup>35</sup>

The will to control one's own existence results in the illusion of being able to manage one's body and health. In chapter 13,

we learn that Kelly had suffered from eating disorders, a condition that affects many young women, as an effect of the excess of perfectionism and self-control:

Since freshman year at Brown Kelly had had the habit of starving herself to discipline herself to maintain rigorous control to lighten her menstrual periods and, after G----, to punish herself for having loved a man more than the man seemed to have loved her, but this past year she was determined to be *healthy*, to be *normal*, forcing herself to eat regularly and she'd regained eleven of the twenty pounds she'd lost, she slept without sleeping pills not requiring even the single glass of red wine she and G---- had made a ritual of before going to bed during those three months G---- had actually lived with her: not even that.

So she'd regained *health, normality*. She was an American girl *you want to look your best and give your ALL*.<sup>36</sup>

The aspiration towards self-determination is impossible due to several factors: first among these is the relation with men. The thesis maintained throughout the novel is that a relationship between a man and a woman, especially when the woman is much younger than the man, is a power relation. The main character is the victim of such a relation, and Oates recounts it through Kelly's actions, words and thoughts, which date back to a past that is not so far: the time when women were seen as appendices of men, in need of their protection because physically weaker.

The protagonist of *Black Water* follows the precepts of the female magazines, while



in the 1960s, at the time of the accident, women used to read advice on how to be more feminine in magazines or in books. An example of such books is one published in 1965 (four years before the Chappaquiddick Incident), *Fascinating Womanhood* by Helen B. Andelin. The guidebook theorizes the differences between the sexes, which must be emphasized in order to exalt one's own femininity.<sup>37</sup> What Andelin defines as "feminine dependency,"<sup>38</sup> is seen as something positive, and not as a dysfunctional feature. Despite the almost thirty years that divide *Fascinating Womanhood* and *Black Water*, the main character of the novel seems to follow the precepts of Andelin's book.

Kelly's attitude towards the Senator is submissive. In chapter 3, when her best friend Buffy asks her why she must leave the party so soon, Kelly is unable to tell her the real reason: "Because he wants me to: he insists. [...] Because if I don't do as he asks there won't be any *later*."<sup>39</sup> The consequences of this attitude are mainly verbal, since, when Kelly and the Senator get in the car, and she realizes that they are roaming along unknown ways, she would like to tell him that they are probably lost, "but hesitated to utter the word [lost] for fear of annoying The Senator."<sup>40</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones defines this characteristic as "verbal hesitancy induced in women by a society in which men have had the first and the last word."<sup>41</sup> Moreover, verbal hesitancy is a consequence of sexual stereotypes, "that the silent women accept reflect the powerlessness they have experienced" because "men are active and get things done, while women are passive and incompetent."<sup>42</sup>

The male presence is pervasive and invasive throughout the novel. When

eventually Kelly manages to speak her mind, the answer of the Senator is rather violent: "I said don't worry, Kelly!"— a sidelong glance, a tight smile puckering the corners of blood veined eyes—"we'll get there, and we'll get there on time."<sup>43</sup>

Independently of the verbal reactions of the Senator, Oates focuses on the physical details, that whole of elements that in Andelin's book distinguished men and women: "When we compare man's body build and superior muscular strength with the fragile structure of woman, we cannot deny that man was also created to be her protector."<sup>44</sup>

In Oates's vision, male strength is not something that protects women, but a force that invades and strangles them, confirming a supremacy that is expressed also with apparently innocuous gestures. For instance "gripping her hand and squeezing it just perceptibly too hard unconsciously as men sometimes do, as some men sometimes do, needing to *see* to *feel* that pinprick of startled pain in your eyes, the contraction of the pupil,"<sup>45</sup> or "[p]enetrated her dry alarmed mouth with his enormous tongue?— He had."<sup>46</sup> They are small gestures that reach their peak in the final, when, in order to get out of the plunging car, the Senator uses Kelly's body as a lever:

[...] he'd been desperate to get free using her very body to lever himself out of the door overhead where no door should be, forcing the door open against the weight of whatever it was that pressed it down and squeezing his big boned body through that space that seemed scarcely large enough for Kelly Kelleher herself to squeeze through but he was strong he was





frantic kicking and scrambling like a great upright maddened fish knowing to save itself by instinct, [...].<sup>47</sup>

In this way, the author subverts the model of the “damsel in distress” saved by a hero, despite the fact that the text is filled with formulas that show how Kelly takes for granted that the Senator is her “protector.” The same scene is recounted from her point of view:

She was fighting to escape the water, she was clutching at a man’s muscular forearm even as he shoved her away, she was clutching at his trousered leg, his foot, his foot in its crepe-soled canvas shoe heavy and crushing upon her striking the side of her head, her left temple so now she did cry out in pain and hurt grabbing at his leg frantically, her finger nails tearing, then at his ankle, his foot, his shoe, the crepe-soled canvas shoe that came off in her hand so she was left behind crying, begging, “Don’t leave me! – help me! Wait!”<sup>48</sup>

The author concludes, some pages later, in the opening of chapter 16, that “HE WAS GONE BUT WOULD COME BACK TO SAVE HER.”<sup>49</sup> This is a hope that derives from women being conceived as someone’s property, always in need of a male figure by their side (perhaps a father figure), which is expressed by an unidentifiable voice while Kelly and the Senator travel in his car: “You know you’re someone’s little girl, oh yes!”<sup>50</sup>

In several points of the novel, we learn that Kelly is really “someone’s little girl,” a formula that can be equated to what Simone De Beauvoir<sup>51</sup> claims in *The Second Sex*:

a woman who gives up her freedom and decides to become a “thing,” the “creature of another’s will,”<sup>52</sup> without values of her own or an authentic existence.

The relationship with her father, Artie Kelleher, is the springboard for all her future relationships. The man seems to be extremely worried about Kelly’s health and he instills in her, in a rather obsessive way, an aspiration towards physical attractiveness and normality that create a sort of “cult of beauty,” impossible to ignore even in the adult age:

[...] to the anxious elder Kellehers, Artie and Madelyn poor Daddy and Mommy peering into their baby’s eyes repeatedly for the first twenty-four months of her life, waggling fingers in front of her nose asking questions trying to keep the worry, the alarm, at times the impatience out of their voices – poor Daddy especially for “abnormalities” really upset him, no doubt it was a family trait, laughing defensively acknowledged: an emphasis upon physical health, physical well-being and attractiveness, *normality* [...].<sup>53</sup>

The aspiration towards physical perfection reflects in Kelly’s fear of not being also morally perfect for her parents. That is why her biggest worry, while drowning, is what they will think when they learn about the accident. Starting from the premise that there will be time to “tell her story,” Kelly imagines that moment, and she rehearses her speech, justifying herself for her affair with the Senator:

Explaining now sobbing and angry to both her parents that she was not



a bad girl, truly she was not. The man was married but not living with his wife and it was the wife who wanted the separation, the wife who had *asked me to leave, kicked me out*, fortunately both their children were adults now and capable of assessing the situation for themselves, a man like The Senator with a love of life a love of people both men and women a zest for meeting new people for exchanging views an appetite for... perhaps it was appetite itself.<sup>54</sup>

The Senator's voice is integrated in this confession where the punctuation is eliminated in order to reproduce Kelly's thoughts. The idea of not being a "bad girl" is reiterated throughout the novel. All this transcends the fear of the opinion that her parents might have of her, because the strictest judge of Kelly's behavior is Kelly herself. In two different sections, the woman reflects upon what is happening to her, interpreting it in a self-punishing perspective, "for her behavior her performance as a *self not herself: not Kelly Kelleher really*,"<sup>55</sup> concluding, "[t]he black water was her fault, she knew."<sup>56</sup>

To complete Kelly's depiction, Oates expresses her thoughts regarding female labor. Although at the beginning of the 1990s it was a commonly accepted fact that women worked, and they did not only have to deal with "more delicate tasks,"<sup>57</sup> in *Black Water* there is a certain perplexity towards women who work. We learn, indeed, that Kelly works as an editor for the magazine *Citizens' Inquiry*,<sup>58</sup> and the entire chapter 30 is an article of hers on the death penalty, with the Senator's comments on the same theme scattered throughout it.

As a volunteer for the National Literacy Foundation of America, Kelly teaches how to read to people "whom the ruthless progress of civilization had left behind."<sup>59</sup> The idea of being a volunteer, once an almost exclusively feminine occupation, takes back to this conception through a sentence on chapter 20, put as a pun to accompany what Kelly thinks of her being a volunteer: "*What's a volunteer, especially a lady volunteer? Someone who knows she can't sell it.*"<sup>60</sup> The woman, who feels "both enthusiasm and zeal"<sup>61</sup> for this job, feels uneasy in revealing it to the Senator:

...not knowing why, exactly...perhaps hoping to seem, not the zealous *volunteer type* with whom The Senator like any successful politician was contemptuously familiar, but another *type* altogether.<sup>62</sup>

All these elements rewrite Kelly/Mary Jo biography, delineating it as a common story with common problems, and, most of all, as the story of a normal woman, subjugated to the power relations with men and "fragile and weaker than man."<sup>63</sup> The conditioning is visible throughout the novel, in the inability to flee a domination that is mostly mental, and to express her thoughts and delineate a "self" that is not "someone's little girl" needing a protector. To strengthen the depiction of this common yet representative woman, Oates, as it has already been said, decides to transfer her story in the 1990s, building a historical and cultural background that is defining of that particular period.

In the essay "History and Hermeneutics," Paul Ricoeur distinguishes the narrative temporality in objective and subjective



succession.<sup>64</sup> The philosopher maintains that our representation of time, which is a subjective succession of events, should be counterposed to a temporal order that is “subject to rules to simple succession.”<sup>65</sup> In *Black Water*, this order is represented by the creation of the historical and cultural setting of the story. The decision to set it in the 1990s does not change the message of the novel, but it makes it necessary to adapt it to the period in which the novel is written. Despite this fact, a historical narration is totally absent. The cultural climate and the historical events of the 1990s are presented through hints and references, comments of the characters or similes.

One of the main events of the first half of the decade was the Gulf War, known as Operation “Desert Storm,” which started on August 2, 1990 and ended on February 28, 1991.<sup>66</sup> The war, between the forces of the coalition led by the United States and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, in response to his invasion of Kuwait, was the first with a live TV coverage of the bombings: this image gives Oates the foundation for a simile in the second page of the novel, where this war is defined as a “TV war”:

Later, when it was sufficiently night, there would be fireworks, some of the displays lavish and explosive in brilliant Technicolor like the TV war in the Persian Gulf.<sup>67</sup>

A second hint is made by the Senator, in chapter 24, when he comments the impact that such a war has had on Kelly’s generation:

– the Gulf War has given your generation a tragic idea of war and of

diplomacy: the delusion that war is relatively easy, and diplomacy *is* war, the most expedient of options.<sup>68</sup>

The sentence embodies, in the statement that “war is relatively easy,” the nature of a conflict like the Gulf War: limited costs and limited casualties for the allies, thanks to the “surgical” bombings made from the sky. Moreover, “diplomacy is war,” because this war had obtained a wide support from the UN and the Arab countries.<sup>69</sup>

The opinion reflects that of the author, since, in a previous chapter, the twelfth, she expressed, through her main character’s words, a negative judgment on George Bush, who had strongly supported the military intervention in Iraq:

[...] each time she saw or heard George Bush it seemed self-evident to her that anyone who saw or heard him must naturally reject him, for how transparently hypocritical! How venal! How crass! How uninformed! How *evil*! His exploitation of whites’ fears of blacks, his CIA affiliation! His fraudulent piety! His shallow soul!<sup>70</sup>

George Bush is the joining link, though not explicit, with another event of those years: the retiring of Associate Justice to the Supreme Court Thurgood Marshall in 1991 and the choice made by Bush, of Clarence Thomas as his substitute.<sup>71</sup> Marshall had been the first Afro-American judge in that role in the 1960s<sup>72</sup> and his retirement is defined in the novel as “the end of an era.”<sup>73</sup> This because when Thomas was nominated, a lawyer who had worked with him, Anita Hill, accused him of sexual harassment.<sup>74</sup> The



judge dismissed the allegations, although they came also from two other women who had worked with him.<sup>75</sup> Given the lack of evidence, Thomas was nominated anyway.<sup>76</sup> What Kelly and the Senator define as “the outrage of the recent Supreme Court decisions”<sup>77</sup> is the fact that it ignored Hill’s and the two other women testimonies, creating an “inhospitable climate” for women.

The political issues are not the only ones that are mentioned in the apparently casual comments of the characters, since the early 1990s were characterized by the spread of HIV.<sup>78</sup> The disease, at the time without any hope of survival and not well known,<sup>79</sup> became a cause of worry and modified the sexual customs of people when a celebrity such as Earvin “Magic” Johnson, a famous basket player, declared he had contracted it in 1991,<sup>80</sup> showing that it was not only a disease caught by homosexuals and drug addicts. In the novel, the virus is mentioned in a brief exchange between Kelly and her friend Buffy. Oates introduces the subject indirectly, recounting of an infection that G----, Kelly’s ex-boyfriend, had given her:

G---- had given her an infection of the genital-urinary tract but it was not one of the serious infections, it was not one of the unspeakable infections, it had disappeared months ago thanks to an antibiotic regimen.<sup>81</sup>

The “unspeakable infection” is mentioned only a few lines later, when, in the morning preceding the accident, Kelly and Buffy go shopping in Grayling Harbour:

In front of La Boulangerie a shiny new Ford jeep was parked and on its rear

bumper was the sticker THERE ARE NO POCKETS IN A SHROUD.

Distractedly, Buffy told Kelly as they were emerging from one or another of the stores, laden with expensive purchases, “Y’know – I don’t know anyone who has died of AIDS since January first. I just realized.”<sup>82</sup>

This brief passage is built through various elements linked by free associations of ideas. The sticker on the car reads a saying of the nineteenth century that urges people to avoid an excessive attachment to their own possessions since it is not possible to keep them after death.<sup>83</sup> It is not casual that Oates highlights the fact that the two women see that writing going out of a shop with their expensive purchase, almost a criticism of American materialism. Moreover, Buffy “distractedly” associates the idea of death represented by the shroud to AIDS, and she tells her friend that she has not known anybody who died from this disease since the beginning of the year. This is an indication of how the mortality caused by the virus was so widespread that people could deal with the subject distractedly while shopping for clothes, with an association of ideas that today would not be as predictable as it was in the early 1990s.

In order to give her readers some cultural references, the author scatters among the pages of the novel two allusions to a philosophy that, in the period of the story, was rather fashionable: the New Age philosophy. It is a trend that exalts a personal spirituality without dogmas that reflects in several fields such as holistic medicine, psychology, astrology and music.<sup>84</sup>

Oates makes two references to New Age. One of them is connected to the



horoscope for Scorpio, Kelly's zodiac sign, and it predicts a flow of energy for it coming from the "New Age." The other reference is in chapter 9:

[...] as, on the radio, out of speakers in the backseat of the car though somewhat muffled by the roar of the air conditioner which The Senator had turned on full blast as soon as he'd turned the keys in the ignition, there came a plaintive adenoidal instrumental version of a song not immediately familiar to Kelly Kelleher.

[...] "An old Beatles song – "All the Lonely People."

"Oh," said Kelly, nodding happily, "–yes." Except this version had no words, this was New Age music. Synthesizers, echo chambers. Music like toothpaste squeezed very slowly from a tube.<sup>85</sup>

The Senator calls the song "All the Lonely People," but it is almost certainly "Eleanor Rigby" by the Beatles.<sup>86</sup> This version, immediately defined as New Age music, shows several features of this genre: it has synthesizers and it is, judging from the simile with the toothpaste tube, fit for meditation and relaxation (two of the main uses of this type of music).<sup>87</sup>

The choice of this song may have a double meaning: providing a reference to

the 1960s, the years of the Chappaquiddick Incident, and using a song about loneliness and incommunicability (Eleanor Rigby is a woman who lives and dies alone) to accompany two characters who are essentially lonely and unable to communicate clearly with each other.

In conclusion, it is possible to maintain that the contrast between objective and subjective succession in this novel is not a clear one, it is rather vague and always referred to a subjective perception of the facts recounted. The references to the historical events are given not to provide an account of the facts, but to give the reader something that Thomas B. Connery defined as "the 'feel' of the facts."<sup>88</sup> Paraphrasing Connery, Oates's aim, constructing the historical counterpart of the fictional story, is a strategy to make the reader perceive the feeling of the time in which Kelly lives and, in a certain sense, to see it through the eyes of a character that can find a new voice only in a fictional story. This new emblematic version of a common woman who was forgotten and almost erased from her own tragic story, allows the readers to find out what her death might teach the contemporary women of her age. It can also help them to perceive the events in the American history of the early 1990s with the same simplicity and casualty of those who lived those events before they became "history".

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## NOTES

1. In his memoir, *True Compass: A Memoir* (London, Little, Brown, 2009), Edward Kennedy declared: "My intention was to take her to the ferry and back to Edgartown and to her hotel," p. 290.
2. The hypothesis that Mary Jo Kopechne died in three or four hours was proposed by Robert Sherrill in *The Last Kennedy* (New York, The Dial Press, 1976), where he describes briefly but vividly the image of the woman trapped in the car, where she survived for hours breathing through an air bubble under the seat (p. 96). He also reports the opinion of the *Esquire* journalist Ron Rosenbaum regarding the time it took her to die, p. 97.



3. Leo Damore, *Senatorial Privilege: The Chappaquiddick Cover-up*, Washington, Regnery Publishing Inc., 1988, p. 191.
4. *Ibidem*, p. 193.
5. The hypothesis was formulated by Joe McGinnis in *The Last Brother* (London, Simon & Schuster, 1993). It was impossible, according to the people who met the Senator the morning after the accident, that he could have been involved in such an accident, since he showed no contusions nor symptoms of posttraumatic shock, p. 544.
6. Damore, *op. cit.*, p. 18, 33, 59.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 155.
8. *Ibidem*, pp. 114-5.
9. Joe McGinnis, *The Last Brother*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 557.
10. Robert Sherrill, *The Last Kennedy*, New York, The Dial Press, 1976, p. 65.
11. Edward Kennedy, *True Compass: A Memoir*, London, Little & Brown, 2009, p. 289.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 290.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 292.
14. Damore, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 452.
16. *Ibidem*.
17. Eleanor Clift, "All the Senator's Women", *Newsweek* (July 9 2009), Vol. 154, Issue 10, pp. 34-5.
18. David Streitfield, "Ballad for the Senator's Victim; But not that Senator, Says Author Joyce Carol Oates," *Washington Post* (June 17, 1992), n.p.n.
19. Brenda Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1996, p. 225.
20. William Kennedy Smith allegedly raped a twenty-nine years old woman in Palm Beach (Florida) on May 29 1991. Smith declared that it was a consensual intercourse, while the testimonies of other women present, who claimed the contrary, were ignored, and the man was cleared up from all the accusations.
21. Gavin Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2005, p. 178.
22. *Ibidem*.
23. Paul Ricoeur, "The Concept of Responsibility, An Essay on Sematic Analysis", *The Just*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 12, 29.
24. Streitfield, *op. cit.*, n.p.n.
25. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
26. *Ibidem*.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. Daly, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
29. Cologne-Brookes, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
30. *Ibidem*.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 182.
32. Daly, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
33. Joyce Carol Oates, *Black Water*, New York, Plume, 1993, p. 99.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 149.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 152.
36. *Ibidem*, pp. 51-2.
37. Helen B. Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood*, Santa Barbara, Pacific Press, 1965, p. 155.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 163.
39. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
40. *Ibidem*, p. 60.
41. Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Écriture Féminine*", *Feminine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer 1981, p. 379.



42. Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberg, Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 29.
43. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
44. Andelin, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
45. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 77.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 76.
48. *Ibidem*, pp. 64-5.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 69.
50. *Ibidem*, p. 58.
51. Carole McCann, Seung-kyung Kim (eds.), *Feminist Local and Global Theory Perspectives Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2003.
52. *Ibidem*, p. 35.
53. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 117.
55. *Ibidem*, p. 48.
56. *Ibidem*, p. 98.
57. Andelin, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
58. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
59. *Ibidem*, p. 56.
60. *Ibidem*, p. 80.
61. *Ibidem*.
62. *Ibidem*.
63. Andelin, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
64. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 648.
65. *Ibidem*.
66. Cf. with Geoff Simons, *Iraq: From Sumer to Post-Saddam*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
67. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
68. *Ibidem*, p. 100.
69. Paolo Wulzer, "Relazioni fra Italia e Arabia Saudita", Matteo Pizzigallo (ed.), *L'Italia e le Monarchie Petroliifere 1991-2011*, Roma, Editrice Apes, 2012, pp. 26-9.
70. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
71. Lee Epstein, Jeffrey Allan Segal, *Advice and Consent: The Politics of Judicial Appointments*, Oxford, University Press, 2005, p. 39.
72. Fred P. Graham, "Senate Confirms Marshall as the First Negro Justice; 10 Southerners Oppose High Court Nominee in 69-to-11 vote," *New York Times*, August 31, 1967, n.p.n.
73. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
74. Linda Campbell, Christopher Drew, "Truth Proves Elusive in Nomination Drama," *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 1991, n.p.n.
75. Ruth Marcus, "One Angry Man. Clarence Thomas Is No Victim," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2007, n.p.n.
76. Kermit Hall, *The Oxford Companion to the U.S. Supreme Court of the United States*, Oxford, Oxford Press, 1992, p. 871.
77. Oates, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
78. Daniel Q. Haney, "AIDS Expected to Be a Treatable Disease in the 90'S," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1990, n.p.n.
79. Danielle Ofri, "Imagine a World without AIDS," *New York Times*, July 27, 2012, n.p.n.
80. Richard W. Stevenson, "Magic Johnson Ends His Career, Saying He Has AIDS Infection," *New York Times*, November 8, 1991, n.p.n.
81. Oates, *op. cit.*, 140.





82. *Ibidem*, p. 141.

83. Cf. Elizabeth Knowles (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

84. James R. Lewis, *Perspectives on the New Age*, Albany, State University of New York, 1992, pp. 187-8.

85. Oates, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1.

86. The song "Eleanor Rigby" (1966, from the *Revolver* album) contains the well-known verse "All the lonely people/ where do they all come from," which probably makes the Senator be mistaken about the title.

87. Cfr. with Patti Jean Birocik, *The New Age Music Guide*, New York, Collier Books, 1989.

88. Thomas B. Connery, "A Third Way to Tell the Story", Norman Sims (ed.), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2008, p. 6.