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Pathological Narcissism in a (Neo)Gothic Setting: Joyce Carol Oates's "Evil Eye"

Abstract: Joyce Carol Oates's writing has been defined several times as too violent, and her work displays a series of features belonging to the Gothic genre. An example of this style can be found in the 2013 novella "Evil Eye", published in the namesake collection, which recounts the difficult marriage between Austin and Mariana, and the return from the past of his first wife Ines. In this story, whose male protagonist is both the hero and the villain, she describes the daily domestic horror of a relationship with a pathological narcissist. In this way, Oates gives both a Gothic character to her story and a cautionary one. At the same time, her operation becomes an embodiment of how she sees the "Gothic" label that has been given to her: as "a fairly realistic assessment of modern life".

Keywords: Joyce Carol Oates; Gothicism; Violence; Pathological Narcissism; Mental Disorder; Domestic Violence.

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Joyce Carol Oates's writing has been defined several times as 'too violent', a remark that the author commented as follows: "when people say there is too much violence in Joyce Carol Oates [...] what they are saying is there is too much reality in life"¹, moreover, "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"².

An episode that happened in 1971, and was recounted by one of the major scholars of Oates, Greg Johnson, shows how the writer's words are well-founded. She had just published her novel *Wonderland*, the fourth in the *Wonderland Quartet*, a tetralogy on social classes in America that also includes *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968) and *Them* (1969). *Wonderland* begins with the escape of Jesse, a teenager, from the massacre of his entire family by his father. On February 1972, Oates read an article about an identical massacre, where one of the children had managed to escape from his father's murderous fury. Oates had been labeled as a "gothic writer" a long time before, and "such coincidences showed that

her imagination was simply responding to the violent reality of America”³. Her reaction was revealed in an interview in *Time*: “Gothicism, whatever it is, is not a literary tradition so much as a fairly realistic assessment of modern life”⁴. This statement embodies the author’s relation with reality, and shows how her labels of “Gothic” or “Neogothic” describe, in a certain way, only some stylistic features of her work and not its content. As she claimed, the violence she perfuses on her pages is not a ‘Gothic’ element, but simply the “horror invading everyday life”⁵. Besides, in her opinion, “if Gothicism has the power to move us [...] it is only because its roots are in psychological realism”⁶. That is why, a Gothic text inevitably “involves the systematic transportation of realistic social and historical as well as psychological and emotional experiences into Gothic elements and structures”⁷. Among these, there are “the kind of extreme psychological intensity and outright horror of events and emotions that result in disturbing vicious and often disgusting scenes of violence”⁸.

The novella “Evil Eye”, published in the namesake collection of 2013, is an example of a Gothic work that sheds light on a problem that is often ignored, misinterpreted, and underrated. This problem constitutes the basis of many episodes of domestic violence, which has “reached epidemic proportions with serious consequences”⁹. Pathological narcissism, which is mainly known as an annoying but harmless tendency to love and worship oneself, can actually have more dangerous outcomes than this. A pathological narcissist suffers from “excessive self-reference and self-centeredness” and he also manifests “grandiosity, reflected in exhibitionist

tendencies, a sense of superiority, recklessness, and ambitions that are inordinate in view of what they can actually achieve”¹⁰. Narcissists are prone to lying, manipulating, deceiving, causing moral and physical violence, with the obvious outcome of destroying the lives of their dearest and closest ones, especially their romantic partners. The high number of books, supporting groups and online forums for narcissistic abuse victims shows that this is very hard to diagnose and almost impossible to cure personality disorder¹¹ has turned into an epidemic.

The aim of this contribution is to analyze Oates’s novella to show how Gothic style and conventions can be functional to describe the “realistic assessment of modern life” and perhaps to help victims of narcissistic abuse recognizing it and save themselves. Indeed, the Gothic, as Helene Meyers claims, offers a “novelistic lens for negotiating the minefield of contemporary discourses about female victimization”¹² and “it also functions as a genre of social realism”¹³. Furthermore, from the beginning, the Gothic has been concerned with women’s “psychological, and physical vulnerability”¹⁴, hence “the Gothic world tends to be coterminous with, or the same as, the ‘real’ world”¹⁵.

The novella opens with the mention of an object, which had belonged to “his first wife”¹⁶. The ‘his’ of this sentence is Austin Mohr, a middle-aged man married to Mariana, a woman who is half his age, and his fourth wife. Oates perhaps gives a reference to a fairy tale character such as Bluebeard, the character of Charles Perrault’s namesake story of 1697¹⁷, when she writes about his collection of wives, all

unknown to Mariana. This gives the first hint of what such a character will be along the narration: an ogre, someone who does not physically destroy his wives, but does the same with their mental sanity. Moreover, the Gothic, according to Allan Lloyd-Smith, “is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present”¹⁸. Additionally, “the idea of a secret plot from the past that structures a contemporary narrative” writes Susanne Becker, “suggests an excess in narrative, a level of narration that doubles or contests [...] the convention of a surface narrative pattern”¹⁹.

The mysterious object, a *nazar*, elicits in Mariana a feeling of curiosity regarding the first wife. Female curiosity, especially in Perrault, is seen as “a sign of the Fall”²⁰, which starts the sequence of events that shape the plot of the novella. Austin explains that it is “a talisman to ward off the ‘evil eye’”²¹, and it can be found in countries such as Turkey, Spain and Greece. The first wife, Ines, is from Spain, and this is certainly a Gothic element that can be traced in the text, along with the presence of the mysterious object. The choice of giving the Spanish “exotic” nationality to the first wife, is consistent with many Gothic stories set in Spain, the most famous of which is Matthew Gregory Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), which is considered a pillar of the genre. The novel is set in Madrid, and it narrates the fall of Ambrosio, a Capuchin abbot. The choice of Spain, or more in general that of Southern Europe countries, was at the time a way to depict the excesses of Catholicism, focusing on its negative sides²².

Mariana’s curiosity is not only elicited by the talisman, but also from the house

where she lives with Austin. One of the tropes of early Gothic is the setting in “ancient stone buildings with elaborate ‘Gothic’ arches, buttresses, passageways, and crypts”²³. Yet, as Allan Lloyd Smith notices, “in time these tropes [...] became as much metaphorical as actual, so that a simple house, a room or cellar, could become a Gothic setting, as the mere use of darkness and barrenness could call up the Gothic mood”²⁴. Additionally, Oates “chooses to place fear and horror in normal American venues rather than relegate them to the classic settings of remote locales, Gothic buildings, and distant anomalies”²⁵. That is the case with Austin Mohr’s house, a monument to “arrogance and pride”²⁶, which is a “stone-and-stucco house amid fragrant eucalyptus trees” with “glass walls, skylights, beautiful airy rooms looking out at the city and the Bay miles away, glittering at night”²⁷ but replete with mysterious objects such as “primitive masks, sculptures, exotic wall hangings, silk screens, ‘shadow puppets’”²⁸, and of course the already mentioned *nazar*. The talisman “did resemble an eye [...] it was rimmed with dark blue, not white, and it was flattened and not spherical”²⁹. The object exudes, as all the objects in the house, “an unsettling sort of beauty”³⁰, which echoes Edmund Burke’s concept of sublime³¹, widely present in Gothic literature. Sublime is, in Burke’s words, “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” since terror is “the ruling principle of the sublime”³². The *nazar*, as all the other objects, prompts Mariana’s curiosity and intimidation, although, in the first phase of the novella, she still hopes to get accustomed to them.

The center of the plot revolves around the visit that Ines, the first wife, decides to pay to her ex-husband, accompanied by her niece Hortensa. Describing Ines to Mariana, Austin says that “she may look like a *prima donna* but she isn’t really. If you don’t let her intimidate you, she won’t”³³. The woman is an actress, and Austin describes her with words that fall into the typical description of an emotional manipulator, hence using the mechanism of ‘projection’. Projection occurs when the narcissist takes the negative aspects of his own self and projects them onto others³⁴. Since Ines is an actress, he believes that “Emotions, too, can be premeditated- rehearsed. Ines likes to stir emotion in others, like tossing a match to see where it will land”³⁵. The description creates a halo of fear in the fragile fourth wife, who embodies the Gothic stereotype of the damsel in distress³⁶. Mariana, apparently feels the peril of the first wife’s rage, since she has “a guilty sense of having usurped another woman’s place”³⁷. Moreover, the past marriage of Austin and Ines is haunted by the tragedy of their infant Raoul’s death. His was the typical inexplicable “crib death”³⁸, because the baby, four months old, never woke up from a nap. Austin surreptitiously suggests that “Ines hadn’t really wanted a baby and she’d had a difficult pregnancy. She’d been just starting to get good film offers, and pregnancy and a new baby sabotaged her career”³⁹. This sibylline remark maintains that Ines might have killed the baby in order to resume her acting career, stopped by the birth of Raoul. Nevertheless, the man insists that he has had ‘amicable’ divorces with each of his previous wives, and Mariana starts seeing the first, and probably most characteristic feature of

a pathological narcissist: “That, in the rich tapestry of Austin Mohr’s life, no single individual could matter very much, except Austin Mohr”⁴⁰.

The character of Austin, a distinguished and “quasi-public man”, director of the Institute for Independent Study in the Performing Arts in San Francisco, where Mariana studied, possesses all the features of the typical narcissist. Having married a needy young woman might be one of these, especially since, after the marriage, the woman had given up her own career to become Mrs. Austin Mohr. Moreover, “he treated her at times like a convalescent”⁴¹, a typical way to reinforce such a dysfunctional bond. Pathological narcissists, indeed, seek their victims among weak and dependent people, who become co-dependents and who can be easily manipulated and forced into a submissive lifestyle that they would not accept if they were stronger⁴². Mariana, as it has been already said, represents the stereotype of the damsel in distress even before she meets Austin. She loses both her parents in a few months, first her father because of prostatic cancer, and then her mother, who dies of a stroke. Only later does Mariana find out that her mother used antidepressants mixed with alcohol to overcome the grief of having lost her husband.

The first feeling that Mariana gets after the two deaths is the will to follow her parents, as an “utterly natural”⁴³ act. All the things that she had done before, such as her research work at the Institute, look senseless to her. It is not a case, perhaps, that Oates chooses as the subject matter of Mariana’s research, the actress and director Ida Lupino (1918-1995) “whose films depicted the Male as the demonic

noir figure”⁴⁴, what in fact the male main character of the story eventually becomes. It is probably a symbolic circumstance that sees the two spouses-to-be examining an episode of *Twilight Zone* directed by Lupino in the 1950’s, “The Mask”, which is set in New Orleans at Mardi Gras. The characters wear ugly masks that reveal their inner selves, and they become imprinted to their faces when the mask is taken off at midnight.⁴⁵ The idea of wearing a mask is central in pathological narcissism, since the outer mask is what a narcissist wears to manipulate and deceive people⁴⁶. It is also a feature of the Gothic, since doubling, according to Meyers, “puts into question the autonomy and integrity of the subject”⁴⁷. Austin wears a mask when, after Mariana’s parents’ death, he acts as her savior and does everything to comfort her, as the hero of the story would do with the damsel in distress. Mariana possesses also the physical features of the damsel in distress, since she becomes “deathly pale and her cheeks thin, her eyes raw-looking, blood-shot”⁴⁸. Her hair “was limp, wan, in need of shampooing”, her fingernails “broken and uneven and ridged with dirt”, and “she weighed hardly more than one hundred pounds, at five feet six”⁴⁹. Austin takes care of her, invites her to dinner, and displays what in a relationship with a narcissist is defined as ‘the idealization phase’⁵⁰. Things, as always happens with such people, move fairly quickly, so that “within a week Mariana was having dinner with Austin Mohr each night, usually alone with him. Within six weeks, Mariana spent most nights at Austin Mohr’s house. And within six months they were married”.⁵¹

As it turns out in any relationship with a narcissist, Austin’s behavior changes

a few weeks after the wedding. Narcissists are prone to “explosive or chronic rage reactions or severe paranoid distortions”⁵², usually without a comprehensible reason. The first *casus belli*, is the organization of a reception at Mohr’s house. Mariana moves some furniture to make the room more comfortable, but she is reprimanded by Austin who claims that “I suggested that you help prepare for the reception, before the caterers arrive. Not that you dismantle my house”⁵³ What the woman notices, is the emphasis put on the possessive, and she experiences the first ‘devaluation’, which is something narcissists use “consciously or not, in an effort to defend themselves against potential feelings of envy”⁵⁴. Although she apologizes profusely, the man seems unable to stop being furious with her. In that occasion, she has the first hint of what the only solution might be:

Badly she wanted to turn and run from the room, and out of the house—she had her own car, she could drive away...The marriage had been a mistake: she must escape. But she knew she must not turn her back on this furious man, she must not insult him further. Though she’d never had any experience quite like this in her life she understood that Austin’s fury had to run its course, like wildfire. If she did nothing further to provoke it, but maintained her attitude of abject apology and regret, the fit would subside, eventually.⁵⁵

Like many victims of narcissistic abuse, Mariana harbors the illusion that keeping a submissive demeanor, the narcissist will go back to his initial loving

behavior. Many victims end up blaming themselves, and taking on all the responsibilities for the sudden transformation of their partners⁵⁶. The “generous, kind, brilliant” man she has married has quickly revealed his “unpredictable nature”, his doubling, whose fury can be ignited in several trivial ways such as “addressing him in a way he interpreted as overly familiar, in the presence of others” or when preparing a meal together “making a suggestion [...] about the recipes he was considering”.⁵⁷ It depends on the incapacity that narcissists have to “experience differentiated forms of self-critique or mild depression [...] in contrast to the presence of severe mood swings, often sparked by a failure to succeed in grandiose efforts or obtain admiration from others or following criticism that shatters grandiosity”⁵⁸.

The mask that Austin wears in public and at work slides off “in the intimacy of private life, in the physical intimacy of marriage [...] reveling in excess of infantile emotion, not to be repressed”⁵⁹. As Otto Kernberg maintains, many narcissists can express their grandiosity in “infantile values” such as “physical attractiveness, power, wealth, clothing, manners and the like”⁶⁰. Yet, in a Gothic text, as Meyers writes, “Mr. Right is always a disappointment and sometimes the cause of death” and women are endangered “by their own belief in male saviors”⁶¹.

The relationship with a narcissist often implies that his/her partner is a codependent, meaning that he or she develops an unhealthy dependency towards the narcissist which can be mistaken for love, because codependents “confuse caretaking and sacrifice with loyalty and love” so “they end up feeling unappreciated and used”⁶².

This set of behaviors is named “codependent martyr syndrome”⁶³. The codependent, being often chosen by the narcissist for his or her weakness, solitude or neediness, feels that without the narcissist he or she is nothing. This arouses feelings of dependency, especially in Mariana that is an orphan, hence alone in the world. The codependent lives in a perennial state of limerence, which is a feeling of “intense joy or [...] extreme despair, depending on whether the feelings are reciprocated. Basically, it is the state of being completely carried away by unreasoned passion or love, even to the point of addictive-type behavior”⁶⁴. That is the case with Mariana, who feels the urge to reveal her feelings for Austin quite often, obtaining no response from her husband who “drifted in sleep and could not respond”⁶⁵. For a narcissist, the couple never comes before the narcissist himself. What Mariana notices is that he never considers the “we” of the couple, but always the “I” of himself. The partner exists only in terms of possession, as something the narcissist feels he is entitled to, as when Austin, after a quarrel with his wife who has gone sleeping in another room, declares quite clearly: “What kind of game is this! My wife belongs with me, in my bed”⁶⁶.

The visit that the first wife pays to her former husband and his new wife soon becomes a Gothic scene, since Ines is missing an eye. “Where her right eye had been there was an empty socket”.⁶⁷ The woman, white-haired and elegantly attired, “knew perfectly well what you were thinking, what shock you’d had— though of course, smiling fixedly at her, determine to behave as if nothing were wrong you would not acknowledge the missing

eye"⁶⁸. What Mariana starts wondering is why her husband did not inform her of Ines's problem, whose etiology seems to be, or so she believes, a past illness such as cancer.

The fact that the character of Ines is missing an eye, is part of Oates's frequent description of "the mutilation of the body"⁶⁹, which, in this story, is also a disquieting and unsettling element. Moreover, the spatial imagery of modern female Gothic, according to Ellen Moers, is based "on portrayals of physical distortion and disfigurement"⁷⁰. All Ines's features constitute what, in Jerrold E. Hogle's opinion, are the very features of Gothic since Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) publication. Hogle maintains that in Gothic texts there are always "ghostly or monstrous figures [...] that loom forth in or invade these settings, usually because of secrets from the past buried deep in memories [...] and may be either supernatural or psychological in origin"⁷¹.

The person accompanying Ines in the visit, the niece Hortensa, is an equally unsettling figure; "plain, dour, with skinned-back hair and small close-set eyes"⁷², her features are "coarsened and plain" and her "colorless" lips refuse to stretch into "anything approaching a courteous smile"⁷³. The girl seems to possess yet another feature: she is immune to Austin's charm.

The dinner the four have together brings up another characteristic element in a relationship with a narcissist. 'Triangulation' is "a common manipulative maneuver" used by the narcissist, which consists in "using a third party"⁷⁴ to confuse the codependent. Even if there is nothing between the narcissist and the person used for the triangulation, the codependent starts to

feel jealous and/or insecure because he or she is compared somehow to this other person. The fact that Austin has dressed up and shaved twice in a day makes Mariana think that he might still be in love with his first wife. What ties them together, she believes, is "the unspoken loss at the core of their relationship- the infant Raoul"⁷⁵. She is aware that she will never have such a strong tie to bond her and Austin. Moreover, the triangulation is made even stronger by the fact that the man ignores the fourth wife and devotes all his attentions to Ines. At the same time, he acts as the perfect narcissist when he prides himself on his cooking, as if he had not been helped by anybody.

The Gothic "merges with supernaturalism and the fantastic, drawing on folktales"⁷⁶ in the conversation when Ines mentions the presence of the *nazar*, and Austin's skepticism towards superstition. She explains her belief in supernatural events:

In the old folks tales there are no natural deaths – spirits cause them. If you are stricken, fall down, and die, it's the place where you die that is responsible – an evil spirit must dwell there. My grandmother told me about a woman who was careless in a cemetery, and dropped an urn, and an evil spirit leapt out of it and into her...⁷⁷

The story only adds further repugnance and dread to Ines's figure, to "her demonic strangeness"⁷⁸. The same feeling catches Mariana when she remains alone in the room with Ines, and she tries to warn her about Austin's personality and the real meaning of that last marriage: "We sense that you have

had a great loss in your life – and that Austin has taken you up, as one of his ‘projects.’ He is not comfortable with strong women – only women missing a part of their souls. Once I was the man’s wife also, before I understood this. As others have been – to their destruction”⁷⁹. Ines explains with precision what a codependent is, though not using this word, and how a narcissist such as Austin uses this condition to destroy her life. The picture displayed by the woman is essentially what Mariana herself is experiencing, since a pathologic narcissist is unable to change his attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, “Gothic characters are often shown as struggling in a web of repetitions caused by their unawareness of their own unconscious drives and motives”⁸⁰, so Austin tends to repeat the same behaviors with each new wife.

Although Mariana does not want to listen to the truths Ines is revealing, something in her “wants to be seduced, violated, transformed”⁸¹, so the woman goes on describing her former husband: “[...] For Austin is not a sane man, essentially- you must know this by now. His madness, he can disguise as many men do, so the woman comes to doubt her own sanity”⁸². Although she does not call this last feature with its name, she is describing the practice of ‘gaslighting’, which consists in trying to convince the codependent that something he or she believes is not true, making him/her question his/her own thoughts and mental balance. The practice takes its name from the 1944 film *Gaslight* directed by George Cuckor and starring Ingrid Bergman, in which the husband manipulated the gaslighting to drive his wife crazy. When the wife complained that the amount of light had changed, the husband answered that the light had always been the same⁸³.

Another aspect of pathologic narcissism is the use of sex either for punitive reasons (withdrawing from it) or to gain narcissistic supply. “Narcissists,” writes Alexander Lowen, “use sex as a substitute for love and intimacy” so “sex becomes a mechanical act between two bodies while the feelings are aroused by and focused on fantasy partners”⁸⁴. This same demeanor is displayed by Austin with Mariana, since in bed he was “affectionate, you could say sexually voracious, greedy; unless he was distant and distracted”⁸⁵. Nevertheless, there is no possibility to reach a real intimacy during the act, and quite often a narcissist will find sexual satisfaction only through unusual practices. It is something that Ines explains clearly to Mariana when she says that: “It is essential not to allow this man to persuade you into performing certain [...] ‘love acts’ with him. [...] For when he talks with his man friends they laugh together, they say crude, cruel things, no one is spared [...]”⁸⁶. But it is too late for such warnings, because the fourth wife has already agreed to perform the above-mentioned love acts. It is here that Ines explains why her niece Hortensa displays an evident contempt for Austin: when she was thirteen she had fallen prey of Austin, although he pretends not to remember it, which is another application of the gaslighting practice.

Eventually, Ines mentions the death of her child, posing that he might have been killed by Austin, since sudden infant death syndrome occurs when a baby sleeps lying on his stomach, and Ines remembers she put the baby in the crib lying on his back. When the baby was found dead, he was lying on his stomach.⁸⁷

The destruction that followed, seems to be the typical ‘discard’ treatment that a narcissist reserves to his victims, since

narcissists “feel secure and triumphant only when they have destroyed everyone else and particularly when they have frustrated the efforts of those who love them”⁸⁸:

“He expelled me from his bed- from his life – soon after. He caused me to flee back home – to my family – I had a collapse, and was hospitalized for eight months. *He* will tell the story, it was my film career I chose, over our baby. Yet in fact it was his own career – he did not want to be ‘encumbered’ – not to take the child with him whenever he would go of course, but just to *think* of the child, and to *be* the father – it was too soon in his career”⁸⁹.

It is very likely that the victim, manipulated and mistreated, develops suicidal or murderous thoughts towards the narcissist⁹⁰. That is what had happened to Ines, when she had plotted to poison her husband with a mixture of barbiturates and tranquilizers, making them pass for the usual antibiotics he used to take for his frequent sinus infections⁹¹.

In the night of the visit, while sleeping, a disquieting element wakes the main character up: it is someone screaming from another room of the house. Ines has tried to kill herself, locked in a bathroom where the remnants of her gesture, blood-soaked tissues, are still visible. Austin sends her away immediately, getting rid of her and announcing it to the fourth wife. The briskness with which he kicks off the first wife from his house, after such a traumatic occurrence, is symptomatic of the “remarkable incapacity for empathy and emotional investment in others”⁹² that characterizes narcissists.

Talking about Ines, Mariana asks her husband why he did not warn her about the fact that the woman was missing an eye. Austin response is both a gaslighting and a devaluation:

“Ines is not missing an eye. Ines has not had cancer – so far as I know. You’re exhausted, and you’re not being coherent. You haven’t been any help in this crisis, you’ve made things worse with your hysteria. All you need to know, Mariana, is that Ines will never visit this house again. You will never see that woman again – don’t worry”⁹³.

The missing eye, which was the most grotesque feature of Ines’s physicality, becomes even more grotesque in this phase, because it is “both ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ simultaneously”⁹⁴. The gaslighting that Austin does to his wife, makes the reader wonder whether this is only a manipulative tactic to bring Mariana to madness, or something she really had just imagined seeing.

A Gothic atmosphere dominates the house in the following weeks. As if the first wife has cast a spell on the house, Mariana becomes aware of her presence through headaches, indigestion and insomnia. She also develops a compulsive gesture: that of touching her right eye to check out if it is still there. She decides then to do something that the author leaves voluntarily blurred. Mariana gets hold of a prescription for sleeping pills and buys a large amount of them. The reader is brought to believe that the woman will use them to poison her husband, but this fact remains somehow confusing in the final lines:

In the living room flooded with late-afternoon light from the sky above the

Pacific, Mariana spread a half-dozen of the gleaming little pearl-pills on the palm of her hand, staring at them with a faint, fading smile as if trying to recall their meaning.⁹⁵

Anyhow, whether Mariana decides to kill herself with the pills or her husband, as many Oatesian characters, she is only acting according to “the forbidden, lawless impulse as a given in the human psyche, which frees victims, particularly women, to retaliate against people and situations that threaten”⁹⁶. This gesture is consistent with the Gothic patterns, since, as Oates claims, “the powerful appeal of the Gothic world is that its inhabitants, who resemble civilized and often attractive men and women, are in reality creatures of primitive instincts” and “our own ethical behavior is suspended, for any means are justified in destroying the vampire”⁹⁷, even kill him.

The analysis of this novella showed how it contains several “Gothic elements and fantasies” which “have the larger function of expanding the thematic range and suggestiveness in conveying the atmosphere of public and private American life in the past and today”⁹⁸. Among these elements it is possible to find the “mysteriousness of human subjectivity”, “the blunt physicality of Gothic horror” and the attractiveness of evil and its ability to make its perpetrators active accomplices in a powerful action⁹⁹. These features are tied to the description of a pathologic narcissist who shows how “men and women are controlled by a range of forces beyond their control”¹⁰⁰. The leading force, in this case, is Austin Mohr’s mental illness, which drives all the events in the story, and also the other characters’

behavior and psychological sanity. It is this last aspect that really concerns the author, along with “these intensely felt nightmarish conditions of the present, with all the anxiety, paranoia, dislocation and explosive conflicts that come out of frustration, of boredom and bitter desperation”¹⁰¹. Hence, Oates’s Gothic has a specific function that provides it with an inextricable connection with reality and its problems, and “the documentary purpose of disclosing quotidian narratives of female victimization”¹⁰². Choosing the Gothic genre, and this particular setting, is not fortuitous, but it is an agenda that is consistent with the fact that, according to Susanne Becker, “Gothic horror is domestic horror, family horror, and addresses precisely these obviously ‘gendered’ problems of everyday life”¹⁰³. Gendered violence, indeed, is quite often what produces news of murders or mistreatment that resemble very much even the scariest and most unsettling Gothic stories.

As Oates declared in a 1972 interview, “It seems that I write about things that are violent and extreme [...] but it is always against a background of something deep and imperishable. I feel I can wade in blood, I can endure the 10,000 evil visions because there is this absolutely imperishable reality behind it”¹⁰⁴.

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