

*Review*

## A Confusion between Hope and Self-Invention in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates

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Oates's aspirational characters desire a new identity in which they re-invent themselves. The act of re-birth is portrayed by distinctive symbols of awakening into a new identity, or by the use of the Phoenix image, which, in Oates's work is influenced by Nietzsche's theory of superman and its re-creation. Nietzsche's concept of re-invention is evident in the isolation and abolition of morality in Oates's characters. Thus *Blonde* depicts destructive re-creation influenced by Nietzsche whilst *Wonderland and The Gravedigger's Daughter*, where the Christian influence is prevalent, instead shows its version of constructive re-creation. Oates juxtaposes a person's re-creation through God, which symbolizes light, with its dark alternative.

**Key words:** re-creation, re-invention, morality, spirituality, superman, Phoenix image, identity, hope

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the tension between secular and spiritual ideologies in the work of Nobel Prize nominee Joyce Carol Oates (1938- ). Oates's fiction suggests that contemporary life poses unprecedented moral issues which are approached by a conservative religion and alternatively by changing social patterns. As she explains, her fiction is an attempt to, "give a shape to certain obsessions – a confusion of love and money [...] of a demonic urge [...] an urge to self-annihilation, suicide".<sup>1</sup> Her fiction emphasizes the human struggle

which is determined by moral choices and aspirational drive for self-invention. She portrays the contest of self-improvement as a relentless process which requires one's re-creation in order to achieve its full potential.

In my study, I will approach Oates's fiction through consideration of the Christian philosophy of spiritual rebirth as a means of transcendence related to the biblical resurrection of Christ. I will also consider Nietzsche's comparable theory of a person's re-invention

<sup>1</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *National Book Foundation*, [http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech\\_joates.html#](http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_joates.html#).

UcyLR\_nVD0cedn, Joyce Carol Oates, Winner of the 1970 Fiction Award for them, 2013, [accessed 26 June, 2013].

to become a superman. I am drawing on the general assertion of Nihilist influence in Oates's texts by scholars such as James Giles, Ian Gregson, Samuel Coale, and Ellen Friedman.<sup>2</sup> I will employ these contrasting perspectives to analyse characters' development and their urge to succeed. I will argue that development of Oates's aspirational protagonists is principally driven either by Christian or Nietzschean principles. In order to compare the relevance of both philosophies, my analysis will focus on the characters' adaptation of hope, their moral choices, community involvement and their consequences.

I will reflect on the process of re-creation, exemplified by the open ending of *Wonderland* (1971), and consider *Blonde* (2000) and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) in more depth. I will examine the positive conclusion of *Wonderland*. The author alters it from its tragic variant where the protagonist's child dies instead of being rescued. The alteration happens due to Oates's own mystical experience about a transcendent world. *Wonderland* is Oates's first text "that doesn't liberate the hero through violence"<sup>3</sup> but liberates the hero through the concept of selfless re-creation. *Wonderland* is the last text from *The Wonderland Quartet* through which Oates presents protagonists who are limited by earthly restrictions. In *Wonderland* Oates introduces her vision of higher supernatural power to overcome the limitations. Furthermore to Oates's initial literary concept of re-creation at the end of *Wonderland*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* displays protagonist's life *after* re-invention and demonstrates the Christian model, while in parallel, the protagonist of *Blonde* clearly represents Nietzsche's concept of re-invention and the *after-life* of an *Übermensch*.<sup>4</sup>

### Philosophic Roots of the Model of Re-Creation

Even though Oates regards herself as a former Catholic, these Christian practices "provided a system of belief against which [it is possible] to measure and develop her own philosophical views".<sup>5</sup> Her texts suggest the system

<sup>2</sup>James Richard Giles, *The Naturalist Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>Joe David Bellamy, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1974), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Dave Robinson, *Postmodern Encounters: Nietzsche and Postmodernism*, ed. by Richard Appignanesi (Cambridge: Totem Books, 1999), p. 76., translated as *overman, superman or higher man*

<sup>5</sup>Greg Johnson, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 41.

of moral values that underpin Christianity and provide a comparison to alternative philosophical theories. Therefore apart from the general term of spirituality, I will examine Oates's allusions to specific Christian beliefs in more depth. I base this approach on Ian Gregson's identification of reversal of Christian values in his analysis of some of Oates's texts.<sup>6</sup> Likewise Brenda Daly recognises Oates's engagement with "transcendence in Christian symbolism"<sup>7</sup> and Asta Balciunaite recognises Oates's "biblical and religious allusions to the life of Jesus Christ"<sup>8</sup>, I will discuss spiritual transcendence in Oates's texts, too, considering her "Christ like", as well as her nihilist characters and their re-creation. I will employ critical perspectives drawn also from Ellen Friedman's study of Oates's *Wonderland*.<sup>9</sup> Not only Oates's intensive study of continental philosophy, specifically the German existentialist Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism, but also Oates's extensive immersion in "parapsychology, mysticism, [Eastern religions, Christian bible] and the occult", which results from her own mystical experience in 1970, may support my analysis of Oates's literary binary oppositions.

Following Schopenhauer's will to live and its influence on Nietzsche's will to power, also Nietzsche identifies a continuous life struggle. This is important to mention in order to understand the development of Oates's characters. Particularly the fact that Nietzsche considers the struggle as a significant determining factor for self-overcoming in order to become a superman. Alternatively, it is significant to note that Christian belief holds that a man is deployed also to fight but against evil in Christ's name as his follower. Samuel Coale recognises the influence of Schopenhauer's opposition between erotic will and responsible intellect in Oates's work.<sup>10</sup> Walter Sullivan asserts that Oates's protagonists experience the "necessity for self-creation" by paralleling its Christian and Nihilist variants.<sup>11</sup> In this thesis I will

<sup>6</sup>Ian Gregson, 'Joyce Carol Oates's Political Anger', in *Character and Satire in Post-War Fiction*, ed. by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup>Brenda Daly, *Lavish Self-Definitions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 243.

<sup>8</sup>Asta Balciunaite, 'The Drama of Affluence in Joyce Carol Oates' Recent Novels' (PhD, University of Leiden, 2001), p. 169 <<https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/14045/Balciunaite-manuscript.pdf?sequence=2>> [accessed 15 December, 2012].

<sup>9</sup>Ellen G. Friedman, *Joyce Carol Oates* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), p. 106.

<sup>10</sup>Samuel Chase Coale, 'Joyce Carol Oates: Contending Spirits', in *Modern Critical Reviews, Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p. 121.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Sullivan, 'The Artificial Demon: Joyce Carol Oates and the Dimensions of the Real' in *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol*

develop Coale's argument which remains in favour of Sullivan's parallel. However, in addition to this, I will focus on significant distinctive adaptations of hope, morality and sociability, and also on the particular Oates's literary images of the concept of re-creation in both the Christian and Nihilist model.

### Hope vs Will to Power

Andrew Delbanco argues that taking chances in life necessarily denotes acting on hope.<sup>12</sup> James Averill and Louise Sundararajan characterise "the action rules" of hope as: "When hoping, people are expected to do whatever is necessary to bring about the desired outcome, for example, by working harder, thinking more creatively, or taking risks".<sup>13</sup> It could be assumed that hope is crucial to the pursuit of aspirations. This implies that a proactive approach and hard work are key to accomplishing a person's goal. According to this, a person should recognise the whole extent of the infinite options which are open to the agent. It is then essential to maximise the effort to explore these. Such arrangements suggest a creative dynamic development towards a desire. However, according to Averill and Sundararajan, it is unlikely to hope for a negative outcome.<sup>14</sup> Since Oates's texts suggest the damaging effect of egotistical aspirations, my research extends the above secular aspect of hope by Nietzsche's and alternatively also by Christian insights.

Starting first with the spiritual findings, according to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* (1265–1274), "hope's object is a good that lies in the future and that is difficult but possible to attain".<sup>15</sup> Aquinas places significant emphasis on possibility which helps people to endure the obstacles they face in their pursuits of desires. Christian existentialist Søren Kierkegaard (1847)

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Oates, ed. by Linda W. Wagner. (Boston: Hall, 1979), pp.77-80, in *Modern Critical Views: Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. by Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.121

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream* (New York: VAGA, 1999), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>James Averill and Louise Sundararajan, 'Hope as Rhetoric: Cultural Narratives of Wishing and Coping', in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. by J. Elliott pp.127-159 (Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2004), p. 135

<[http://www.indigenouspsych.org/Members/Sundararajan,%20Louise/Hope%20as%20Rhetoric\\_Cultural%20Narratives%20of%20Wishing%20and%20Coping.pdf](http://www.indigenouspsych.org/Members/Sundararajan,%20Louise/Hope%20as%20Rhetoric_Cultural%20Narratives%20of%20Wishing%20and%20Coping.pdf)> [accessed 23 March, 2013].

<sup>14</sup>Ibid, p. 135

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Aquinas, 'Summa Theologiae', ed. by 1966 Blackfriars, vol 33 (Washington D.C.: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1966), 2a2ae,Q17,a1, p. 5.

defines hope as a virtue of supernatural moral excellence which is achieved through faith.<sup>16</sup> It might be inferred then that in Christianity hope is positioned beyond rationality. British theologian Francesca Murphy (2007) expands this theory further by pointing out that the future possibility being sought is explicitly contained in hope relating to God's universal goodness, whilst excluding personal fantasy or rational expectation.<sup>17</sup> Based on this premise, hope tangled with faith rejects the selfish human will, enabling instead the will of God to be enacted in his or her life. By that faith such a person trusts the fulfillment of God's beneficial plan, and therefore formulates, "still not my will, but yours be done".<sup>18</sup> Indeed this mode of hope is what is being portrayed in some of Oates's texts, most systematically in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*.

While in Christian theology, hope, faith and love are three virtues, Nietzsche's understanding of hope is different. He refers to Greek mythology, where Pandora was created to punish mankind with a gift from the gods, a box full of ills and hope. After opening the box, the ills spread into the world, but hope stayed inside. Nietzsche's interpretation of this is that since despair is a product of lost hope Zeus's retention of hope means that he does not intend for people to commit suicide out of despair. In Nietzsche's view, however, hope is, "the worst of all evils, for it protracts the torment of man", thus challenging the positive aspect of hope, which is firmly asserted by Christianity.<sup>19</sup> According to him, hope only prolongs people's suffering as their hope cannot be fulfilled. Instead, Nietzsche appraises the will of desires and passions, and argues that this will should be extended into will to power in order to live as a higher man. The higher man then is not a subject to traditional morality, or "herd morality", but becomes a master, who he creates his own values.<sup>20</sup> In Nietzsche's philosophy, the superman is a superior character, who lives an "earthly life"<sup>21</sup>, prefers art and "the auto suppression of morals", which results in the replacement of community by

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<sup>16</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. by David Swenson and Lillian Swenson, vol 2 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 317.

<sup>17</sup>Francesca Murphy, *Mary: Mysteries of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>18</sup>'Christian Community Bible', First edn (San Pablo: Editorial VerboDivino, San Pablo Internacional, 1988), Luke 22:42, here "yours" denotes God's.

<sup>19</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup>Dave Robison, *Postmodern Encounters: Nietzsche and Postmodernism*, ed. by Richard Appignanesi (Cambridge: Totem Books, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 30

solitude.<sup>22</sup> Analysis of a range of Oates's novels shows how she juxtaposes the Nietzschean and Christian interpretations of hope.

## Blonde

Particularly in *Blonde*, Oates deploys Nietzsche's model of man-made self-creation by presenting the character of Norma Jeane Baker or Marilyn Monroe pursuing her dream of becoming a famous artist. Her mother, Gladys, teaches Norma Jeane that, "Fear is born of hope if you could excise hope from your life you would excise fear".<sup>23</sup> Thus, at an early age, Norma learns not to rely on hope. Instead of hope, she displays a self-driven will to possess the identity of Marilyn Monroe. She follows her mother's philosophy, "*Where there's a will there's a way.*"<sup>24</sup> In an argument over her role as Cherie in the film *Bus Stop*, Jeane reiterates her concern pertaining to hope. In a daydreamed conversation to the Playwright, her lover, Jeane says about Cherie:

*Not because she's a failure. Because she has pretensions. She has hope! [...] You laugh at Cherie, people like you. Because she has hope and she has no talent. She's a failure. [...] It's just that I love Cherie and want to protect her. From a woman like "Marilyn" she'd be compared to, y'know? That's when people laugh.*<sup>25</sup>

Oates uses direct interior monologue to penetrate Jeane's mind. Jeane is aware of her new identity as Marilyn. Marilyn's strong will is embedded in rational expectation, which is woven into a dream of fame. As a little girl, Jeane's exposure to the Hollywood ideal of gender roles motivates her dream of a "Fair princess" and of her "Dark Prince".<sup>26</sup> Claudia Schmitt argues that cinema teaches Jeane particular lessons about gender and sexual manipulation.<sup>27</sup> Jeane learns that an alluring physical appearance can help her to fulfill her desires to be loved and become a successful artist. After the failure

<sup>22</sup>Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 93 (auto suppression of morals).

<sup>23</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (London: Harper Perennial, 2000), p. 207.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 94

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 548

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 77

<sup>27</sup>Claudia Schmitt, *Der Held als Filmsehender: Filmerleben in der Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. with Manfred Schmeling, Hans-Juergen Luesebrink and Klaus Martens (Wuerzburg: Koenigshausen & Neumann GmbH, 2007), p. 170.

of her first marriage, Jeane determines to accomplish her goal. Marilyn secures her position as a star by challenging the traditional moral values relating to her sexual demeanor. Apart from hard work in lessons, she takes advantage of her sexuality or abortion and exchanges it for a role. Marilyn is resolute in her achievement of the specific desired outcome in contrast to her role of Cherie, who inhabits the Christian understanding of hope, and its rather broader object. The fictional Cherie embodies the Christian model of hope while Marilyn contains a Nietzschean one.

In *Blonde* Marilyn prioritises her career over her soul, in contrast to Marilyn's supposed father: "between my soul and my career I choose—my soul, he said".<sup>28</sup> She limits herself to worldly delights, neglects spirituality as such. Even though Marilyn succeeds as an American idol, "Miss Golden Dreams", her happiness is repeatedly demolished.<sup>29</sup> She isolates herself, encounters a disillusion and lacks self-fulfillment. She is haunted by depression, and insomnia, and becomes suicidal. Marilyn develops artificial relationships and lacks essential support in a time of crisis; eventually the fulfillment of her desire begets dissatisfaction. As Nietzschean model of self-will abolishes hope, morality and sociability, thus Marilyn acts on her own will, lacks morale and separates herself from the society.

## The Phoenix mage

Oates's aspirational characters desire a new identity in which they re-invent themselves. The act of re-birth is portrayed by distinctive symbols of *awakening* into a new identity, or by the use of the Phoenix image, which, in Oates's work is influenced by Nietzsche's theory of superman and its re-creation: "ready must thou be to burn thyself in thine own flame; how couldst thou become anew if thou hast not first become ashes!"<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche instructs a person to isolate himself and "thou solitary" become a God-like creator of himself whilst accepting the leadership of "seven devils" on the way to gain "a God will" in the creation of self.<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche's concept of re-invention is evident in the isolation and abolition of morality in Oates's characters. Thus *Blonde* depicts destructive re-creation influenced by Nietzsche whilst *Wonderland* and *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, where the Christian influence is prevalent, instead shows its version of constructive re-creation. Oates juxtaposes a person's re-creation through God, which symbolizes light, with its

<sup>28</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde*, p. 22

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 423

<sup>30</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (London: Penguin Classics, 1974), p. 118.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, p. 118

dark alternative.

I will examine the phenomenon of Nietzsche's concept of re-creation in *Blonde* by paralleling it with the Christian theology. Whilst in Christian teaching man shows love to God by obeying him, Jeane in *Blonde* obeys "the Dark Prince" who is her "beloved".<sup>32</sup> In Christianity, God promises eternal life and a king's inheritance to those who follow Christ, but in *Blonde* the "Dark Prince" promises immortality and Jeane's conversion into the "Fair Princess".<sup>33</sup> In her conscious fantasy, Jeane follows the "Dark Prince", drinks the given elixir and echoing Phoenix imagery is set on fire: "My hair afire, my belly afire, my eyes afire, I would leave my burning body behind .... The burning Princess was dead. & I was alive".<sup>34</sup> Oates applies alliterative textual complexity with the child-like innocent language indicating the burning body parts. Marilyn's usage of such a register emphasizes the naivety of her dreams. The fairy tale elements evoke exciting romantic expectations over the transformation and the dramatic tone of the burning body suggests sense of a magical mystery.

As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche's theory of re-invention rejects hope, in favour of, selfishly determined will, the suppression of traditional morals, isolation over community, and - in *Blonde* specifically - man's re-creation is explicitly indicated through the image of Phoenix where fire symbolises its purifying function. In contrast, Christian theology and its concept of re-creation encourages hope, faith in God's will, traditional moral values, reciprocity within community, and fire that predominantly symbolizes light. In Christianity, the source of re-creation is directed to God, whilst Nietzsche's hypotheses indicate that one has to "create thyself out of thy seven devils".<sup>35</sup> Therefore, in spite of the parallel in the existence of the concept of re-creation in both, Christian and Nietzschean philosophies, there are also significant distinctive characteristics. Oates uses Nietzsche's reversal of Christian values and symbols to develop her binary contrasts of light and darkness, constructive and deconstructive re-inventions of identity. In spite of the nihilist urge for phenomenal restrains from all stereotypes, paradoxically, Oates uses the innovative image of superman's re-invention as an additional limiting framework linked to a secular development. Oates challenges human preferences for self-improvement and clearly articulates their tragic consequences. However in addition to this, she suggests possible transformations of issues through mindful moral and personal spiritual preferences.

<sup>32</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde*, p. 732

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, p. 734

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, p. 734

<sup>35</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 118

### The Spiritual Aspect of Re-Creation in Oates's Texts

In comparison to Marilyn in *Blonde*, according to the Christian concept of re-creation, complete joy is found by offering yourself to God's absolute love, "... that my own joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete".<sup>36</sup> The concept of complete joy is related to God's fundamental commandment to love one another. In Christian terms, Christ's resurrection restores original spiritual human dignity, which was damaged by the sinful desires of Adam and Eve in Eden. Similarly the characters of Jesse in *Wonderland* and Rebecca in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* are transformed, so that they can reach their new spiritual life. Prior to that, Jesse surrenders his egotistical desires and pride, and Rebecca establishes a personal relationship with God.

After being exposed to the Christian church, Jesse in *Wonderland* is adopted by Karl Pederson who educates Jesse in the Nietzschean belief system. Dr. Pedersen is "straining to be God, [and claims] to move into that place which is God's place", and believes that Jesse will share the fate of "a higher man" together with him.<sup>37</sup> However, Jesse rebels against Dr. Pedersen and helps his wife, Mrs. Pedersen, to escape. After that, Jesse pursues his career, secures his social standing by a wealthy marriage and, in consequence, neglects his own family. However, by the end of the novel, the disillusioned Jesse reestablishes moral conduct and sacrifices his possible affair with Reva Denk, who challenges him to leave his family. He chooses to care for his daughter instead, and hopes for the victory of love over pride. As Friedman sets out, by that he accomplishes a state of equilibrium, and Jesse shrinks from a proud surgeon of "an Übermensch" to an ordinary being, questioning himself.<sup>38</sup> Friedman further points out that "instead of repeating his father's act" of murder, "Jesse finally becomes the redeeming Christ who acts on the imperative that *love demands rescue*".<sup>39</sup> Friedman's interpretation of the moment when Jesse cuts himself prior to the rejection of Reva is "an epiphany [...] a ritual of purgation [...] that will cleanse him of narcissism" and Friedman explains Jesse's bleeding as his return to humanity.<sup>40</sup> In addition to that I see this as linked to the bloody sacrifice in the Christian image of redemption on the cross, which precedes a joyful re-creation. Similarly, new Jesse yields himself humbly to others, rejects worldly pleasure, and seeks spiritual fulfillment. He courageously acts on hope and

<sup>36</sup>*Christian Community Bible*, John15:11, here 'my' denotes God's

<sup>37</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *Wonderland* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), p. 101.

<sup>38</sup>Ellen G. Friedman, p. 96

<sup>39</sup>Ibid, p. 110

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, p. 107

looks for his daughter. The novel ends with Jesse's achievement of happiness which is conducted by saving his daughter from death as a junkie.

Re-created Jesse in *Wonderland* and Rebecca in *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, in contrast to Jeane in *Blonde*, cherish the community, follow moral standards that determine their new self-awareness which is grounded in hope. Rebecca is exposed to hope through Miss Lutter, a practicing Catholic, who voluntarily makes orphaned Rebecca her ward. When Rebecca sings in a church choir: "Her heart beat strangely, she became excited. Oh, suddenly there was hope".<sup>41</sup> In spite of her doubts Rebecca prays and even hears Christ. Consequently, there is a metamorphosis in her thinking. Rebecca willingly sacrifices worldly pleasures, for instance, she is reluctant to have sexual intercourse with Tignor, until he promises her marriage. She does not marry Chet Gallagher, until her first husband dies, although she already has a new birth certificate, which gives her the freedom of choice. However, Rebecca abandons Miss Lutter and church with Tignor. Afterwards she feels guilty and sometimes "a pang of loss" when she passes the Christian church.<sup>42</sup>

After leaving Tignor, just as Jeane becomes Marilyn in *Blonde*, Rebecca gains a new identity, as Hazel Jones. The new name of Rebecca's son, Zachariah, is taken "from the bible"<sup>43</sup>, and means "remembered by God".<sup>44</sup> Hazel also recalls her neglected spiritual journey. Similarly to Jesse's re-creation, Hazel's constructive re-creation is preceded by the image of bleeding. Rebecca willingly sacrifices herself for her son Niley and asks her husband to beat her instead of Niley. When she wakes up from unconsciousness after the aggressive attack of her husband, she and her son are bleeding. While there is only "a bright blood-blossom" on Niley's face, Rebecca, "washed her hands, her arms, her chest that was smeared in blood."<sup>45</sup> Relating to Christian crucifixion, Rebecca willingly makes a bloody sacrifice of herself for her son, while being unjustly accused by her husband. Her small son perceives that, "it's like she and I have died", suggesting rejection of their former identities.<sup>46</sup> Afterwards they head to a new location without any financial support, work or without any legal proofs of their new identity. Hazel hopes for a positive new beginning:

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, p. 198

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, p. 295

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, p. 340

<sup>44</sup>*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/zachariah/edn>, Bible Study Tools, trans. by James Orr, June, 2013, (Zachariah), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, [accessed 22 June, 2013].

<sup>45</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, p. 332

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, p. 339

"Nowhere is where we are from, mister. But somewhere is where we are going."<sup>47</sup> Hazel denies her past and focuses on the constructive future.

Re-created Hazel now perceives: "*The breath of God*. A wayward breeze that would drive her in a sudden, unexpected direction that was yet determined, purposeful".<sup>48</sup> Rebecca believes in transcendental signs and ponders their superior direction. "The breath of God"<sup>49</sup> recurs four times in the text before the final, "the breath of God [which] had blown them here", to Zachariah's piano performance, during which Rebecca experiences a mystical reconciliation with her dead parents.<sup>50</sup> Balciunaite argues that this is the culmination of Rebecca's identity as Hazel stops running from her past.<sup>51</sup> Consequently Hazel seeks re-union with her family. After the concert, Hazel grasps, "the eye [instead of *breath*] of God".<sup>52</sup> "The breath of God"<sup>53</sup> suggests motion, while "the [stable] eye of God"<sup>54</sup> implies rather a static state. This is before a celebration of Zachariah's performance, which opens a discourse between a joyful accomplishment of spiritual freedom and the Christian model of re-creation.

Eventually Hazel recognizes her redeemer and she initiates dialogue: "*Christ so lonely for the life you saved me from...*".<sup>55</sup> Thus Rebecca acknowledges a supernatural aspect of her new life and accepts transcendent assistance. Mirroring Christian theology, Rebecca's desire for happiness is not driven by an egotistical will, it is not obtained by dreaming, nor by logical calculation. Instead, Rebecca peacefully, even through hardship, acts on hope. She, like Jesse, recognises a higher purpose of their existence and trusts in its positive outcome. Consequently, they align their lives to traditional moral values and abandon their personal pride and comfort for their beloved children. In spite of the unfortunate circumstances Hazel and Jesse are happy and their ultimate selfless desire for fulfillment is accomplished.

## The Fulfillment

However, despite the numerous Christian allusions identifiable in *Wonderland* and *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, Rebecca's and Jesse's belief does not require

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, p. 344

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p. 466

<sup>49</sup>Ibid, p. 528

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, p. 546

<sup>51</sup>Asta Balciunaite, p. 38

<sup>52</sup>Joyce Carol Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, p. 552

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p. 528

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, p. 552

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, p. 530

the sacramental life of the Christian church, suggesting a deviance from it. Furthermore, the author portrays the protagonists' spiritual pursuit of happiness as an oblique process which is fulfilled in the present life rather than in mystical afterlife. In Oates's texts, prevalence over moral issues is found on earth. Innovatively, her characters do not have to wait for a heavenly reward in the transcendent world, as believed in Christianity. Oates uses Christian concepts of hope, morality, community, sacrifice and redemption in her texts to forge something new. Rather than following a particular religion fully, Oates literary vision articulates an individual way to transcend situations.

Reading Oates's work through Nietzschean and Christian theory suggests that humankind longs for fulfillment. Oates defines the concept of satisfaction differently by various characters who can be interpreted through Nietzschean or Christian belief systems. The author questions the essence and the ability of spirituality to satisfy the human desire for happiness. Oates's fiction queries the idea of success, and at what cost it is attained. Many of Oates's characters seek to be reborn, to establish their own identities and despite the pain involved, wish to maintain optimistically their share of luck. Oates portrays the power of will and determination tangled with the danger of self-obsessed desires which Oates links to secular ideology. She captures a melancholic strain in the egocentric characters' development, as it lacks an ethical backdrop. The strand of melancholy implies unsettled aspirations which result in depression and suicide, which Oates confirms by images of darkness.

By comparing the Nietzschean and Christian strategies employed by Oates's protagonists, readers may observe a relevant transformation of, for some, obsolete religious doctrines, and also alternatively of the disenchantment with the untraditional mode of individual self-realisation. Oates brilliantly sets the still influential Nietzsche's philosophy of a person's re-invention as a reaction against the Christian conservatism. However, this progressive strain for self-improvement accommodated itself into rather collapsing selfish gains in Oates's texts. Lack of Oates's contentment with the development of America concerns her literary work with the emergence of a new spiritual transcendence. Oates's born-again somehow spiritual conversion suggests a revival and posits the desired individual and also social improvement.

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