

The City and the People

(A Study of J. C. Oates's *Them*)

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Joyce Carol Oates (1938–) is marked as one of the most significant novelists to have emerged in the United States in the 1960's. She was born and brought up in rural New York. Finishing her undergraduate course at Syracuse University in 1960, she received her Master's Degree in English from the University of Wisconsin. She taught at the University of Detroit from 1962 through 1967, which formed a precious period for her creation of *them*. She is now professor of English at the University of Windsor, Ontario and lives in Canada with her husband Raymond Smith, who she married while she was still in graduate school.

One of the obvious characteristics of J. C. Oates as a writer, is that she combines quality and quantity in her work. Since she made her formal debut in letters with *By the Gate* in 1963, she has published at least 7 novels, 11 books of short stories, 4 volumes of poetry, 4 plays and 2 volumes of critical essays, editing 1 anthology of contemporary American stories. Among the countless literary awards she has won, the most impressive is the National Book Award given for her novel *them* in 1970. Also she was First Prize Winner of the O. Henry Award in 1967 and repeatedly appeared in the O. Henry Prize Stories.

From the start of her writing career Oates has stood on the basis of traditional realism. Her characters, male and female, young and old, are vividly depicted through her keen sensibility, powerful imagination and profound knowledge of literature and psychology. Quite a few characters of Oates's, not to mention those appearing in *them*, tormented by the pressures from outside and inside themselves, are tragically in pursuit of their personal identity. The solitary and weary young man in *The Census Taker*, walking alongside the frozen drive through the harsh and twisted grass toward a forlorn house is threatened by the terror of violence of nature as he looks toward the sky stretched above him like a frozen sea. He tries hard in vain not to lose his own identity. In *The region of Ice* we see the Jewish student, bright but completely isolated from others frustrated by his unrewarded love for the nun who teaches Shakespeare at the university. In despair and solitude he cannot restore his identity but kills himself in the icy plain of Canada. Intensely interested in the mystery of human emotions, Oates explores the depths of human minds and dramatizes various grotesque elements lying there. No wonder her works contain scenes of violence such as murder, suicide, injury, adultery, robbery and acts of treachery. She seems to liberate her characters occupying her mind through the acts of violence. In the chapter "Cassandras" Alfred Kazin criticizes Oates:

My deepest feeling about her is that her mind is unbelievably crowded with psychic existences, with such a mass of stories that she lives by being wholly submissive to "them". She is too attentive to their mysterious clamor to *want* to be an artist, to make the right and well-fitting structure. Much of her fiction seems written to relieve her mind of the people who haunt it not to create something that will live. (1)

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In answering J. D. Bellamy's question as to her habits of writing, Oates admits Kazin's criticism as follows.

I am addicted to work, which is to say the expulsion of buildup ideas and formless forms the need to get rid of little stories that crowd my head. Alfred Kazin was quite right in saying that I sometimes write as if to relieve my mind of things that haunt it, not to create literature that will live. But I don't think many writers really work consciously to create literature — that will be monumental like *Ulysses*. I think most writers write out of an interior compulsion, hoping that it will add up to an artistic statement of some worth.⁽²⁾

Them was published in 1969 partly with the help of a grant given by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, one of the numerous awards Oates received. According to the author's note at the beginning of that novel, she came to know Maureen Wendall, the heroine of *them* while she taught at the University of Detroit. Maureen had been in her evening class and wrote to her personally later. Oates was overwhelmed by Maureen's various problems and complexities and became aware of her life story as the possibility of a story. So the novel *them* was mainly based upon Maureen's numerous recollections.

..... so much material had the effect of temporarily blocking out my own reality, my personal life and substituting for it the various nightmare adventures of the Wendalls. Their lives pressed upon mine eerily, so that I began to dream about them instead of about myself, dreaming and re dreaming their lives. Because their world was so remote from me it entered me with tremendous power and in a sense the novel wrote itself.⁽³⁾

Briefly, *them* is a narrative concerning lower-class Americans in Detroit in their struggle for life. It covers thirty years starting in 1937 and ending with the 1967 eruption of Detroit's Blacks. Though it deals with the three generations of the Wendalls, it is too complicated to be called a saga. Like a rapid stream branching itself at random into many tributary waters, it goes into details about the main characters, their kin, friends and those directly or indirectly in contact with the Wendall family. So much happens and so many characters walk about the pages that the readers may wonder where Oates will take them and what her message is.

Undoubtedly, however, it is a peculiar type of social novel, which contains a voluminous records of emotions centered around the three characters: Jules, Maureen and their mother Loretta. Their adventures are tragically connected with city life. As Oates depicts their fear, anger, adoration for love, strong desire to get out of poverty and so forth, she skilfully reveals their background little by little—a huge industrial city of Detroit; it looms as something eerie with some social contradictions in it. It is evident that Oates is deeply concerned with the moral and social conditions of her generation. Kazin says that “a sense of fright, of something deeply wrong” is expressed in *them* as a particular sensibility to individual lives helplessly flying off the wheel of American gigantism.

Joyce Carol Oates seemed, more than most women writers, entirely open to social turmoil, to the frighteningly undirected and misapplied force of the American powerhouse. She plainly had an

instinct for the social menace packed up in Detroit, waiting to explode that at the end of the nineteenth century Dreiser felt about Chicago and Stephen Crane about New York. The sheer rich chaos of American life, to say nothing of its staggering armies of poor, outraged, by no means peaceful people, pressed upon her. (4)

The long narrative begins with a sentence "One evening in August 1937 a girl in love stood before a mirror." The girl with "mindless bland blue eyes," surprisingly narrow waist and a little broad shoulders is Loretta at sixteen. She is in Saturday mood and her heart begins to pound "with anticipation of the long hours ahead during which anything might happen." (5) She has no idea what a terrible thing is going to happen to her that night.

Her grandparents were settlers from another country. The grandfather was sort of man who made thousands of dollars in a month with his construction crew and then lost it all quickly. Her father was one of those tragical victims of the 1930's depression. He used to work with a construction crew and had his own car, but he lost his job because houses were not built. He worked wherever he could get a job, even selling papers. When the situation looked better, he went back to his building but the times were not quite right yet and so he waited a few years but the times never got quite right for him. Terrified and unable to make sense of his terror, he took to drinking. Now he had been out of work for almost ten years and could not do anything except drinking, smoking and lying in bed.

Brock Botsford, Loretta's elder brother, was a 20-year-old boy of peculiar type who worked in a factory making parts. It was hard to tell whether he was smart or dull. He was wild and had the kind of strange thing about him that people did not understand. A bloody scene came in when this Brock shot Bernie Malin, Loretta's boy friend, on their first night of rendezvous. Whether from jealousy or from an impulsive desire to kill someone with the revolver he was carrying, he committed a phantom murder while the two were asleep. Loretta was a strong girl but terribly shocked. She instinctively felt that Brock had done that.

Gradually she began to see the blood on him. It was moving. Across the side of his head shyly turned from her, a stream of blood was moving and soaking into the pillow..... She did not move. She could smell his blood. Words came to her again, like an incantation. *My brother is to blame, him, that bastard.....* If she could throw it all in his lap, take all this trouble and toss it like garbage at him, if she could get rid of it somehow, then she would be free..... (6)

But early on Sunday Howard Wendall, dressed in a policeman's uniform appeared from nowhere and kindly disposed the body in a way as if Bernie had committed suicide. Brock had disappeared free of the crime and did not return until the latter part of the novel. Instead, however, Loretta became pregnant and married the policeman. She went to live with him on the south of the town. This was an advance for her. She had always been anxious to get out of her poor circumstances.

The yard were marked off precisely. Though kids ran through them and knocked the string and the sticks down, still the yards were marked off, and Loretta liked this touch of privacy. She felt that she was entering a new life. She was finished with her old life—taking care of her father and Brock, living in that dump, unmarried, on the loose. She was going to forget everything about it. (7)

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The first baby, who was to become the hero of the novel, was named Jules. When he was a year old, Howard was suspended for the force for taking dollars from whores. Loretta put her hand over the baby's silky hair, and "thought in terror, *Then things are not settled in my life.*"⁽⁸⁾ Loretta's mother-in-law was shrewd and calculating. Though she was a harsh woman, she never made a mistake in her judgment. Following her suggestion, the family moved in with an uncle of Howard's who lived in the country. Howard had got a job at a gypsum mine—not as good as his police job but good enough. During the first month in their new life, Loretta wept for her lost city and its dirty air. Howard went to and from his unexciting job, and had become spiritless and fat, "Howard was slowing down, getting fat and him not yet thirty, Loretta thought in a panic, letting himself go already!..... Her heart filled with bitterness."⁽⁹⁾

Before spring came Loretta had another baby to take care of. She was named Maureen, the heroine of this novel. Loretta's life had settled down into a dull routine of housework and babywork under the dominion of her mother-in-law. Just before Howard left for war, she became pregnant for the third time. She could not make up her mind whether this was Howard's third child or the second. She lay awake beside her sleeping husband and dreamed of Bernie, imagining him alive. She was only sure that Jules had Bernie's energy and charm. After all, she decided to leave the country and went back to Detroit with her three children. Almost twenty-five years old, she felt independent and cheerful but had little money with her. She found them a room above a funeral parlor, and after putting her children in one bed she went out. When she tried to enter prostitution, the man took hold of her wrist and led her up to a patrol car with the words DETROIT POLICE in white on its side. Later, Jules gathered from innumerable arguments between his mother and father that his mother was out on the street once and was not even able to succeed at that. His father laughed about this many times, bringing out this old story whenever he was drunk.

Jules was the one who had to go through his adventurous life, who the author seems to have described with most compassion and love. It is not impossible to see something of a budding reformist in the little boy Jules. He was a noisy, joyful child, perverse and wilful. His mother was amazed at his nerves and the distance he could travel. He was strangely independent and mysterious even to his mother. At five he was found sitting on the stone steps of the district schoolhouse waiting for the recess attracted by the building itself. He hung around it all day and went back after supper sometimes. When the family went to see the scene of a two-passenger plane crash, in which the officials from the state government fated to die a sudden, flaming death, Jules slipped out of his mother's grasp and pushed through to the very front. People were talking that one of the men had had the top of his skull sheered right off as if with an ax. That night Jules was found in a strange condition in one of the barns.

He was sitting with his back to her (Loretta), in the hay, a small child, very still, just sitting She could hear him saying something, talking to himself. A rapid, frightening mumble..... a kind of breathy argument. Probably he was stammering, which she hated, the beginnings of words stumbling over themselves and piling up so that nothing could get loose, as if he were choking, so small a boy, suffocating with the urgency to speak..... There was something dark and strange about the place he was hiding in.⁽¹⁰⁾

Jules ran away for the first time when he was six and was found fifteen miles away by a farmer's wife. Once he tried to play magic for Maureen, lit a match and dropped it into the hay. The fire spread in several directions and burned the barn. Grandma beat him severely with a stick till blood began to run, yelling at the end, "You'll wind up in the electric chair and I'll pull the switch!"⁽¹¹⁾ At twelve he was a sharp, handsome boy. He liked his home and school, but he was always too busy. After school he ran half a mile to a five-and-ten cents store where he worked. He was hired for a quarter or half a dollar an hour if he arrived there early enough, helping unpack and unwrap. Ramie Malone, the biggest of the boys working there would tell him of the latest news not put in the newspaper, of men found in the trunks of cars only a few blocks from Jules's house, tied with wire, shot dead. He would tell Jules of a nigger given a beating at one of the precincts; all the men pounding on him with their clubs, all over his body and on his face, until that bastard's eye popped right out of his head and onto his cheek, the real thing. As Ramie had a cousin who was a policeman, he knew everything. He told Jules all about niggers. "What they want most is to get some kid like you or me, white kids, and scalp us. They do that. A man was found with his scalp half ripped off, and he said niggers did it. You got to watch out for those dirty bastards. "Jules felt a prick of terror at the possibility of trouble; he looked about, waiting for it. When he saw a Negro on the street, he stared cautiously, wondering when the trouble would come." What secrets did niggers have? Where was the mystery? A few years ago there had been a riot on the Bell Isle Bridge and people were still talking about it, still angry. Jules wished he could have seen the riot."⁽¹²⁾

Jules had a tendency to long for something much higher than himself. He fell in love for the first time at twelve with a young nun who taught Maureen's class, fifth grade at a nuns' school and played the piano at assemblies. He had noticed her, admiring the rapid runs and rushes of her pale fingers.

He was entranced by the fluttering of her black sleeves and the flash of white at her slender wrists. Left to himself in class, pretending to be working on an assignment he let his mind drift onto her and onto the intricate melodious passages of her music, which seemed to him exotic, amazing, beyond anything he or the people he knew could ever attain. There was something magical in her, in her very being. She seemed a part of the music she made.⁽¹³⁾

With his thought half on the nun, however, Jules lost his chastity to an older girl working at the five-and-ten cents store. Some time later he was expelled from the nuns' school for beating up some Italian children.

At home there was trouble when his father came home drunk. His mother went to her girl friend's house and played cards, drinking ale. He and his two sisters wandered down the alley as they pleased. "Most of the time they climbed to the roof of an apartment building where some of their friends lived, and some of these children spent the night out—some sneaked out, some had to get out because things were too rough."⁽¹⁴⁾ The Wendalls now lived in a two-family house, his widowed grandmother living with them. Grandma, weak and sick, complained about the Mayor, the Governor and most of all President of the United States. She said they were playing a joke on her. The United States was crazy, Europe was crazy and all of the world is a garbage dump, she said. The clinic to which Jules took her was a new, cheap building, only one story high. People there are described:

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Detroit people—Polish mothers, Polish children, old men out of work, middle aged men out of work, welfare slobs, the sick, the dying, the prematurely wasted, all of them sitting staring at one another with gaunt, suspicious eyes. The whites stared at the whites and at the Negroes; the Negroes stared at other Negroes and at the whites..... They put on their coats in that humble, resigned way of people on charity, halfway out the door as the left sleeve is conquered, head bowed, eyes spiteful and apprehensive. (15)

While waiting for his grandmother, in the odor of unwashed bodies so oppressive and yet so narcotic, Jules thought of the life he would break into in future. He thought he would lead a life that involved supporting his family and then get out from under them. *I will change my life in the end*, he thought. He would go to California. Then his attention was caught by the cover story of the Time, about a man from India by the name of Vinoba Bhave, who said, "We are all members of a single family..... My object is to transform the whole of society. Fire burns and does its duty. It is for others to do theirs." (16) Jules was fascinated and those words remained in his mind. He was fifteen and the time was 1953.

Jules now held a job at a liquor store, where he helped load up the delivery truck and rode along in it. He was anxious for the day when he could drive the truck himself. Though he was not paid much, he liked the expensive look of the bottles and their fancy titles; he liked being around successful people; he liked riding in a truck and unloading liquor at the service entrances of big houses. Also he worked at a parking lot for fifty cents an hour, helping the attendant between seven and two in the morning, when people in marvelous cars came to entrust them to Jules or the attendant. These people were headed for two or three good restaurants nearby, or across the way to the Sheraton-Cadillac, where things were going on not just on Saturday nights but forever. One night he was strangely excited, leaving the lot at two, and wondered if he could break into a building. He was walking the side of a big tavern, when a squad car came. He made a mistake, for he took a guilty step backward. It was too late. The policeman yelled and Jules dashed and kept on running. Two or three shots were fired. Jules ran into someone's shanty, but the door was kicked open. "I didn't do anything!" said Jules, crying. "Hey, you little bastard, trying to run away on me!" the cop cried. He put the barrel of his pistol against Jules's head. And he pulled the trigger, but it clicked upon an empty chamber. In disgust he raised the gun and brought it down on Jules's head. "Jules fell. He felt himself being kicked, being turned over onto his back; he felt his pocket turned out and something taken, and he began to weep with his eyes closed, too terrified to play dead. (17) After the policeman left, Jules could not move as if he were paralyzed. He found his empty wallet lying a few inches away. When he finally got home, it was after three in the morning. He had been robbed by the policeman of the money earned at the parking lot.

Jules was 16 and Maureen 14 when their father was fatally wounded at the factory. A ton of something fell on the two men. It was a tragical death. Jules had never loved his father and always wondered what he was. After the funeral he found it was anger that underlay in the mind of the dreadful man.

Maureen, who had grown up into a quiet, slender girl, was in the ninth grade of a nuns' school. The secretary's job was the most important and the one she was proud of, but there were many things for her to do. As Loretta was working as a waitress, she got tired and slept till late. Maureen had to do all sorts of housework in the morning and when she came back from school. She wrote out the secretary's

minutes at school, staying late, in fear of getting the book soiled or crumpled at home. Her younger sister Betty was a flippant, talkative kid. Jules worked for a truck outfit and had his own car, a 1950 Ford, and came home to sleep once or twice a week. His mother did not know where he slept the other nights. He had been picked up with some other boys for something—burglary, trespassing or suspicious behaviors but he was let out in three days. Now that the grandmother was in a nursing home, the family moved into a corner apartment over a drugstore not far from the Cadillac plant. It was a better neighborhood

Before long Loretta married Pat Furlong, a truck driver with a thick, muscular body. He was a noisy, vulgar man, fond of drinking. Maureen hated him. She would try to do schoolwork, shutting her ears against the noise from the kitchen or from the television set or from Loretta and Furlong arguing or laughing. She could not sleep right. Jules was always gone, never came to visit. Betty stayed out till late. "Everything was busy, noisy. Maureen thought that life should be quiet and sensible but there was always too much happening at their place.... Maureen felt a peculiar tenderness toward her (Loretta), resentful, partly protective. But she was measuring everything against the time when she would leave home, like Jules." (18) She formed a habit of drifting into the library whenever she was free. Most of all she liked novels. She liked novels set in England. As soon as she read the first page of a novel by Jane Austen she was pleased, startled and excited to know that this was real: the world of this novel was real. "Her own life.... could not be real. The birdlike chatter of her mother, Betty's grunts and bad temper, the glimpse Maureen had to content herself with of Jules out on the street was not so real as novels not so convincing. There was nothing permanent about them, as there was about the people in novels." (19) In the middle of her confused life Maureen lost the precious secretary's book and was severely demanded to look for it. She had a hard time looking for it in vain till she was pardoned for her efforts. She was glad, but it left a sad, unforgettable memory on her mind.

By and by Maureen came to be possessed by fear of money and felt she should work. Loretta was going to have a baby. If Furlong died? Jules brought Loretta twenty dollars a week, a secret from Furlong. Maureen practiced prostitution and was seen to be with the man in his car by Furlong. That night the furious father-in-law beat up Maureen, who lost consciousness and lay invalid for thirteen months. Furlong was arrested and jailed for four months. Various stages of divorce followed. Jules felt a terrible anger rise in him.

Jules was employed by Bernard Geffen as a driver, whom he met through Faye, a friend of his. Bernard was a busy, agitated man. He looked wealthy and interested in investments. From the beginning he believed in Jules, whom he handed a 10,200 dollar check. When Jules called on him at the appointed house, he found Bernard lying on the floor with his throat cut. Probably he committed suicide, for nothing appeared in newspapers about the murder. Meanwhile Brock, after 19 years' interval, visited Loretta and came to live with them. "Brock wasn't stupid-looking but rather dense-looking with a hard, sour, grainy face and eyes that Jules realized were very much like his own eyes." (20) This uncle was a mystery to Jules. Loretta had hinted at times that she had a brother who had done something and had to run out of town.

At eighteen Jules fell in love with Nadine Greene, Bernard's niece. She was a beautiful girl who belonged to the upper class and his love was a tragical, unrewarded love that would lead him to physical and spiritual frustration. At first, though, he successfully stole in her room and they ran away in a car as far as Beaumont Texas. At a motel Jules became ill and lost his consciousness. Leaving Jules in a suffering state, Nadine disappeared in the car. Jules wandered here and there in Texas doing odd jobs.

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He never forgot to send a letter to his mother with some moeny in it, inquiring after Maureen, telling not to let them push her around at the welfare and so forth.

In July 1966 Jules was 27 when he came back to Detroit. Uncle Brock, who had helped Maureen recover by his kind, patient talk with her, was now in hospital with a mysterious sickness and not getting any better. Jules drove his mother every week to the hospital.

This part of the hospital was for welfare cases mainly, and therefore many Negroes were about in various stages of undress, sitting up, reclining painfully, lying motionless beneath stark white sheets, bed after bed of sick, harmless people. Jules steered his mother along. He dreaded her whispering to him, "Aren't you glad you're not a nigger, at least?" which she had said to him in the past. They passed open wards, a long line of beds. Loretta looked around pitingly. She was so conscious of being white! And finally she did turn to Jules and say in a low voice, not quite a whisper, "Jesus, how'd you like to be a nigger and sick on top of it? I did that much for you at least. kid." Jules expelled his breath to show sympathy, humor. Actually he was immensely grateful for being white. In Detroit being white struck him as a special gift, a blessing—how easy not to be white! Only in a nightmare might he bring his hands up to his face and see *colored* skin, Negro skin, a hopeless brown nothing could get off, not even a razor. (21)

Jules now held a job as a driver with his uncle, his father's brother, Samson Wendall. The job did not pay well but he believed in future. When he was at a restaurant with his uncle one day, he came across Nadine, as beautiful as ever but married for three years. Some time later they had a date at a hotel. They camd out and were walking alongside each other, when Nadine took a gun out of her pocket and fired two shots into Jules's chest. He almost died but he did not die. Nadine turned the gun on herself but failed to kill herself also. Jules was carted into the emergency ward of a hospital. "For many months he had inhabited a body..... sewed up, plugged up, maybe stuffed with bloody cotton pads. They had gotten him ready for use again. But gratitude? Did he have to feel gratitude? His mind went dim. He'd outlived himself, in a body. He had become a weight, Jules, an object, throwing a shadow uncertainly before itself but taking up no room, anyway." (22) Wandering in the street he was spoken to by Mort Piercy, who proved to be an ideological leader. Mort seemed strangely fond of Jules and took him to his group. Later Jules found himself involved in a scene of the blacks' riot.

Jules scrambled backward in the broken glass, panting, crying out, "My God, give me a chance—Let me get out the back door, will you?" The policeman's rifle was tangled in Jules's legs. Jules kicked it aside. With a sudden explosion of strength he grabbed the man's neck and wrenched him around; the man slid on the glass and fell heavily. Jules snatched up his own gun again. The man would not stop yelling. Now he was lunging for Jules's legs, and Jules had no choice but to smash him in the face..... and this time he felt the gristle of the man's nose breaking..... Having done this he had done everyting. It was over. His blood ran wild, he was not to blame for anything. Why should he stop? He aimed the rifle into the man's face and pulled the trigger. (23)

There was much shooting, burning, looting and killing. Loretta had her apartment destroyed with a firebomb. She was knocked down and her leg bruised. With a weak, sobbing crowd of people she was

taken to the Fisher YMCA. They fed her and gave her a blanket. Then she was sent to a family who had opened its home to five riot victims. When they were watching one of the discussion programs on television, Loretta was shocked to see Jules on the screen who had long disappeared into Detroit. He was shown with Dr. Mort Piercy whom the moderator introduced as the new head of the United Action Against Poverty Program in Detroit and an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Wayne University. Jules said he was newly appointed a committee member and made some agitating remarks in a loud voice. Loretta was ashamed and thought she had given birth to a murderer.

In March 1966 Maureen was all right and was making up for the months she had missed for her sickness. She lived alone, had a daytime job and attending the evening courses at the University of Detroit. Getting through much, she was no more interested in novels; she came to believe that a real life was much more valuable than fictions. When she failed in the courses she was taking, she left the University and enrolled herself in a course at Highland Park Junior College. Then she fell in love with one of the instructors, a married man with three children. She at last succeeded in marrying him and entered a new life which she had crazily longed for. When Jules visited her to say good-bye as he was going to California, she said she would never see any of her family members, their kin and friends. Jules said joyfully, "But, honey, aren't you one of *them* yourself?" (24)

So far is the struggle for life the three members of the Wendalls got through. They seem to have gained a temporary success but nobody knows whether their future will be rosy or not. Jules who dreamed going far away, is thirty and is going to Los Angeles where he will go into business of some kind. He thinks he has deserted all his worthless life in the past and believes in future only. Though geographically separated, he will keep writing to his mother at least once in a while. Kind hearted man as he is, he has given warm atmosphere to this depressive novel through his love to his mother and sister. Maureen is twenty-seven and is going to have a baby. Impatient to preserve her new life which she has won, she does not want to make contacts with her family, even to see her loving brother who is rumored to be a Communist. Loretta is a cheerful, talkative woman, always ready for the next day. She is ready to begin all over again if necessary. She is always curious, even in her complaints anxious to see what is going to happen next. That cheerfulness has helped her conquer all the hardships she faced. Now she will miss her favorite son and daughter terribly.

Any city has its poor people. The larger the city, the larger is the number of the poor supposed to be. In a huge industrial city of Detroit, where life is busy with a rush and everything is changing so quickly, poor people are tormented by oppressions from outside and inside themselves. They cannot go away from the city, though; they have to stick to it so as to live on. Socially and mentally they are solitary people. They cannot define their own problems as social contradictions. They are so eager to express themselves but do not know how. At times they are terrified and have no idea where the terror comes from. To get rid of the terror they become addicted to drinking. We see a sad example in Howard Wendall, a sullen fearful man, who Jules was afraid and hated, and whose identity he could never grasp. When Howard sat drinking ale from the bottle, silent, Jules wondered what he was thinking of. "Of his job? Of his sick, stinking mother? Of her Social Security pension? Of the car breaking down again? Of the rent on this dump of a house? Of the niggers moving in a few blocks away? Of his wife's sullen padding in bedroom slippers out in the kitchen? Of supper, pork chops frying in a pan? What did he think about?" (25) After Howard's tragical death Jules realized anger was at the core of him. "... his soul was anger, made up of anger. Anger for what? For nothing, for himself for life for the assembly line, for the

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cockroaches and the dripping toilet... Anger. No money.”⁽²⁶⁾ Maureen thought of her father, even years after his death, as leaves like spears. There was something dense about her father and, beneath the density, a sharpness that was frightening. Howard was a typical overburdened family man of poor whites who had forgotten to laugh and never been loved by his children.

Almost everyone in the novel is obsessed by the idea of money, from the mysterious wealthy-looking Bernard to a man shouting, “ All the niggers are on welfare, why not me? Us?”⁽²⁷⁾ It was for money that the quiet, book-loving Maureen practiced prostitution. “What she could understand was the money in her purse..... It was something that could be counted again and again; it was as real as a novel by Jane Austen.”⁽²⁸⁾ In connection with money suicide, murders and various crimes are committed. The number is too large to be investigated individually. Little attention is paid to death. The sight of a river brought up the image of death to Jules:

Out in the river there were maybe bodies beneath the surface of the water, or at least there were stories kids told about seeing bodies bob to the surface and then disappear again..... the dead, the drowned.... so silent and patient.... Jules felt that these mysterious people moved about in ordinary air, corpses that looked alive.⁽²⁹⁾

The eruption of the blacks was something destined to break out. The antagonism between blacks and whites, and the rumors about blacks' unrest serve as underplots.

... the Negroes were standing out on the street corners all day long thinking what to do making plans. Fires and shootings. Burn Detroit down.⁽³⁰⁾

Them, niggers will get control of this city yet. They'll put a padlock on it and put up roadblocks and, brother, that will be the end!⁽³¹⁾

The arguments among the young reformists around the Wayne University as to whether they should enlarge the riot into an all-out black revolt or assassinations of V.I.P.'s or a protest against the Vietnam situation sound ridiculous and even comical. The riot was nothing more than the explosion of the accumulated dissatisfaction, a happening peculiar to a large city. It was a hot summer.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, when, thanks to highly developed mass communication, we are well-informed of what large cities really are, the features taken up as extraordinary facts in the earlier city novels do not move us any more. With the glimpses of Detroit at the background Oates has depicted with delicate compassion and tremendous detail the emotional life and the adventures of the people who squirm at the bottom of the society. She does not show us, however any ideal image of suggestive shape. As a result she imparts to us a feeling of despair and an everlasting sense of drift. She was, as Kasin says, caught up in the “avalanche” of time.

Notes

- 1) Kasin, Alfred: *Bright Book of Life*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1973, p.p. 203-204
- 2) Bellamy, Joe David: *The Dark Lady of American Letters: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates*, the Atlantic Magazine, Boston, Mass., 1972, Reprinted in the Studies of American Novels Edited by S. Sadoya, No.3. Taibundo, 1974, p.32
- 3) Oates, Joyce Carol: *them*, A Fawcett Crest Book, New York, 1969, Author's Note
- 4) Kasin, Alfred: *Bright Book of Life*, p.199
- 5) Oates, J. C.: *them*, p. 10
- 6) *ibid.*, p.29
- 7) *ibid.*, p.42
- 8) *ibid.*, p.51
- 9) *ibid.*, p.57
- 10) *ibid.*, p.63
- 11) *ibid.*, p.69
- 12) *ibid.*, p.78
- 13) *ibid.*, p.75
- 14) *ibid.*, p.87
- 15) *ibid.*, p.94
- 16) *ibid.*, p.95
- 17) *ibid.*, p.113
- 18) *ibid.*, p.p.164-165
- 19) *ibid.*, p.165
- 20) *ibid.*, p.250
- 21) *ibid.*, p.323
- 22) *ibid.*, p.417
- 23) *ibid.*, p.467
- 24) *ibid.*, p.478
- 25) *ibid.*, p.100
- 26) *ibid.*, p.135
- 27) *ibid.*, p.135
- 28) *ibid.*, p.196
- 29) *ibid.*, p.134
- 30) *ibid.*, p.315
- 31) *ibid.*, p.124
- 32) *ibid.*, p.204

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1. Kasin, Alfred: *Bright Book of Life*, Secker & Warburg, London 1973
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3. Oates, J.C.: *By the North Gate*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Conn. 1963
4. Oates, J.C.: *The Wheel of Love*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Conn. 1965
5. Oates, J.C.: *Wonderland*, Fawcett Publications, Inc., Co., 1971
6. Gossett, Louise Y.: *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, Duke Univ. Press, Durham, N.C., 1965
7. Gelfant, B.H.: *The American City Novel*, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1954
8. 大橋健三郎: 「荒野と文明」研究社
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