JOYCE CAROL OATES' FIRST NOVEL

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ALTHOUGH IT HAS TAKEN REVIEWERS and critics more than a decade to recognize that Joyce Carol Oates is not writing in the mode of the naturalist or the social realist,[1] her first novel introduces the search for self-realization that provides the narrative structure of all Oates' fiction. The true subject of *With Shuddering Fall* is not, as reviewers assumed it to be, madness or violence.[2] It is the complex drive of the human organism toward psychological wholeness which Jung terms individuation,[3] and here Oates holds in uneasy tension the entelechy of personal individuation and the psychologically entrenched power of those institutions which impede it.

Written while the novelist was an undergraduate, the first novel resembles, in many of the perceptions of the two major characters, "The Myth of Sisyphus" as it might be recreated by an autistic high school drop-out — exactly the developmental stage of protagonist Karen Herz. With her racing-car driver lover, Shar Rule, Karen participates in a dream suggesting the extremes to which existential recognition of self-responsibility leads. The structure of the tripartite novel originates in the psychic condition of Karen before, during and after her moral maturation. The short first section takes place in Eden County, the mythical territory in which the second novel and many of the early short stories are set.[4] It reveals Karen in a quiescent, but restless, moral state. The long middle section has as its background the racing circuit towns of Synderdale and Cherry River, presenting the emotional and physical violence with which, for Oates, the self is inevitably created. The brief final section returns to Eden County; leaving ambiguous, but achievable, a consolidation of the moral independence to which Karen aspires.

As the structure of the novel derives from Karen's moral states, so does the psychology of her character originate in a mnemonic pattern through which

reduplicated scenes force her to confront the emotional price of moral dependence. In much the way as the bit of tea-soaked madeleine evokes for Proust's Marcel elements of the past which create a new reality in the present, Karen re-experiences humiliation and suffering and is strengthened in her nascent desire to seize control of her life. Waking on the morning of what, unknown to her, is the day that she will leave Eden County, Karen forces herself up and out of the deep, protective slumber that has immured her since birth — giving to the life where her destiny is shaped by the family and its traditions a dream-like quality. The previous night she had listened to her father reading of the biblical patriarchs whose destinies were manipulated by God himself and had felt keenly the lure of such surety. Karen recalls the visit to a dying neighbour on which she recently accompanied her father. Even when she was a small child, the hermit, Old Rule, had inspired awe in her: she had feared touching the rock that was his seat by the creek. Now his impending death awakens in her a sense of both dread and anticipation. In his junk-filled sickroom, several days ago, Karen was seized with terror at the sight of a trap protruding from beneath his bed. She senses inchoately that he is linked with an unknown destiny that awaits her apart from her existence as the pampered youngest daughter of a back country patriarch.

Before the day ends, Rule's son, Shar, has given Karen a glimpse of that destiny. Shar is thirty; brutal and surly, he has been recalled by his dying father to the hills he fled fourteen years earlier. Accustomed to taking what he wants, and fascinated by the pale golden beauty of Karen who was three years old when he left Eden County, Shar deceives her into accompanying him on an errand. Though Shar has presupposed an innocence in Karen that will necessitate sexual coercion, he unknowingly becomes the tool, and ultimately the victim, of a force compared to which his carnal obsession is whimsy. Karen resists his advances, yet the idea of returning home creates hysteria in her. Seizing the steering wheel, she causes an auto crash that foreshadows, even in the imagery of its voluptuousness, the track smash-up in which Shar will die. The crash triggers a violent confrontation between Karen's father and Shar. As Old Rule's body burns in the cabin his son has ignited, the two battle before it — an encounter that for Karen quite literally ends the old rule and further awakens her from moral somnolence.

Since Karen's earliest memories Shar has symbolized a dark and forbidden world, unknowable to her as the protected daughter of the community's largest landowner:

> Now, a man of thirty, Shar belonged to neither world — not the dim, safe past or the static present . . . he had always been on the periphery of their lives — despised and admired by the children themselves. . . . he now revealed himself as a creature of another species, a stranger. Karen had felt watching her father and Shar at supper . . . a sense of warning, of something unavoidable they must — together — defeat.[5]

On the day he returned to Eden County, Shar had reminded Karen of "... a hawk, a bird of prey that circled the skies". Now, watching her father's futile efforts to force Shar backward into the burning cabin, as though he were driving a demon back into hell, Karen knows that her anticipated destiny is embodied in this struggle. She murmurs, "Never the same again!"

Even as she stands over her father, who has been knocked to the ground by Shar, and hears his command, "Karen — Get him. Don't come to me until you get him. Kill him. Kill him," Karen recognizes her complicity in the action:

> Karen felt that, deep inside, secretly ... she was able to think clearly and sanely. The fault did indeed lie in her, was of her doing: but it originated not in the decision to go with Shar but in her deliberately resisting sleep that morning. That was so — she had pushed against sleep, pushing herself up out of it as though she were moving slowly up through water to the clean air above ... Perhaps she had understood, without really being able to know, that the rejection of her child's bed would lead, after a series of insane, vivid scenes, to the picture of her father lying in the cold mud, bleeding ... how right he was to judge her, to find her guilty!

Although Karen accepts the fact that in willing herself to awake from the dream of childhood she is guilty of her father's injury, and although she pursues Shar as her father commands, finally dictating his death, the recognition of Oates' use of incrementally important memories reveals that Karen's actions derive not from her father's command, but from a force toward self-determination that is hers alone.

The scene before the burning cabin takes place in a context that seems unreal to Karen, like a dream or a nightmare. But as she begins to pursue Shar, her head is clear. These are images of a dichotomy incrementally associated with the struggle to free existence from chance that is the novel's thematic centre. What happens as the result of unthinking acceptance of the cycles established by family, church or nature occurs in the state of dream, fog, insanity or nightmare and is *accident* to the individual who has not reflected and chosen. What happens as the result of sanity or clarity of vision or choice is *freedom*. Karen, significantly, integrates the content of the unconscious, making it a conscious choice when she gives herself to Shar. Following him through the woods, while her father lies unconscious, she ponders, "... if this was not a dream it was closely related to a dream — surely she had dreamed of a man in this wood, a man in any of the woods, awaiting her".

Mnemonic motivation continues as Karen pursues Shar across the frozen terrain of Eden County: the memory which overpowers her is of an incident from her childhood in which she made a moral choice at great cost. She had shocked and offended a male teacher who pruriently sought the details of what boys had done to her on the playground:

> "Tell me what he does," the teacher said.
> "He does this!" Karen said impatiently. She pulled the skirt of her dress up and stared at the teacher's alarmed look. "I'm not ashamed of anything," she said, letting the skirt fall back . . . "Now you leave me alone too!" Even in the face of the knowledge that she would be completely alone at school after this, she could not help but feel a sense of bitter joy . . . In spite of her anger she knew somehow that she had done right, and that the teacher, shaken and ashamed, recognized it.

Now, pleading silently for the forgiveness of her father, whose rule she has abandoned in order to further forge her own moral universe, Karen follows Shar into the rat-infested barn where they make love. On the penultimate page of the novel, Karen, who has suffered a psychic collapse after Shar's death, analyzes the alternatives now open to her in what doctors call her "self-cured" state. She realizes that in this initiation lay the germ of Shar's death:

> I can accuse him [her father] of my own crime and guilt and with enough hysteria I can convince myself that I had no part in what I did — that the filthy way that strange man made love to me the first time had nothing to do with that man's death. . . .

Together Karen and Shar leave Eden County. Shar, who denies any responsibility for the confrontation with Herz, asserting, ". . . it isn't the end of anything . . . It's only now begun." When the mid-section of the novel opens, two and one-half months later, Shar has just begun to comprehend the meaning of his own disclaimer. Gradually he is being forced out of the moral passivity from which Karen arose on the morning of the day he struck her father. Here, in the racing-circuit towns of Synderdale and Cherry River, the two undergo the violent moral maturation that assigns to Shar the fulfillment of the novel's strange title and creates in Karen a consciousness which will ultimately transcend the knowledge that is its content. The title comes from Meredith's "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn," suggesting in its rhetorical context the positive and consummative nature of Shar's death:

> Death shall I shrink from, loving thee?
> Into the breast that gives the rose,
> Shall I with shuddering fall?

In Synderdale Oates introduces Max, Shar's sponsor, a bloated, voyeuristic entrepreneur who would be psychopomp to Karen and Shar though his own existence exemplifies a moral stance diametrically opposite theirs. Max, whose name, given its German pronunciation — mocks — indicates his moral callousness, insists he is arbiter of ethical responsibility while insulating himself from accountability by self-deception, over-indulgence, hypochondria and pseudo-piety. Impotent, Max has vicariously shared Shar's willingly recounted sexual exploits

for fourteen years — inhibiting moral awareness in the younger man to nourish his own lust for omnipotence and omniscience. Like the gods whom Sisyphus affronted, Max has robbed Shar (and would rob Karen) of his dignity by assuming responsibility for his actions. When Shar realizes that in leaving Eden County he had not escaped one mode of life for another, but merely traded his legal father for Max, he recognizes Max as an aspect of that imago in which Karen had perceived Old Rule — as a rock protruding from a creek. Such figures always create obstacles around which the life of the individual, if it is not to be dammed or diverted, must cut its own channel. The image also reflects, albeit unconsciously, the authority of the Church — the rock which, for Karen, (and socio-historically) is inextricably linked to the authority of the father. But as the gods under-estimated Sisyphus, so is Max wrong in his assessment of Karen and Shar. He speaks of them as innocent, incapable of sin, brutal, clever children, full of life and destined for a long life — asserting that for them all things are accidents. However, when Shar forces an opponent into a flaming crash which Max calls an accident, Karen insists in cold anger, "Not all things are accidents." On the evening of the track "accident," Max sits in a country tavern with Shar, Karen and other racing circuit people. In a scene infused with perverse sexuality, he re-lives Shar's violent triumph:

> . . . Max sat with his back to the wall so that he could see everything that went on in the crowded place. He ate melons luxuriously: pale green melons, smooth as skin, that the waiter — a boy of about seventeen — kept bringing him. Seeds had spilled out onto the table and on the front of his shirt, though he did not seem to notice. He waved the big glistening knife at them as he spoke . . . "A woman's love is a beautiful thing to see," Max went on, licking at a sudden rivulet of juice that ran down his chin. "She is transformed by it, absolutely transformed. That has never been part of my experience" . . . With a flourish Max finished his melon and took a deep breath and called for the waiter. "Another one of these," he said, sighing helplessly. The table was wet with juice and scattered seeds that the boy — a rushed, alarmed-looking country boy with long hair — did not offer to wipe up, "You must tell me how the race was for you," Max said, laying a damp hand on Shar's arm.

As Max leaves the tavern with Karen (Shar remains behind with another woman), he recoils in fear from a small boy holding a snake. The reptile incorporates for Max the universal principal of evil which he would deny, and in its phallic signification, the humiliation of his own impotence.[5]

Max posits for Karen an innocence that protects her from suffering and urges her to abandon any hope of finding meaning in existence: "Your life is not a metaphor for anything else," he coaxes; "it ends when you do". In his self-deception, Max, whom Karen once speculates might have devoured Shar, fails to understand that it is exactly the certainty of death which impels the individual

to search for meaning in life, and failing to find it in traditional forms and institutions, to create it within the confines of free will. As Karen's attraction to Shar grows, she begins to sense the threat it poses to her freedom: waiting in a shabby room for him to come to her, she contemplates the possibility that the passive resistance which has defined her intactness thus far may not be enough. Against the force of such passion, it may eventually have to yield to an act of violence.

Because Max considers himself alone capable of moral contemplation, his miscalculations are immense. In his blind omniscience he pontificates that Shar functions not consciously, but viscerally: Shar from the stomach and Karen (because it seems more delicate to him) from the heart. Ironically, Karen, whose last name means heart in German, has earlier made the bitter decision to harden her heart, to render herself pitiless. On the night of the melon-eating incident Karen had lain in a hotel room, knowing as the hours passed that Shar was with another woman, and had resolved to resist "... a universe that contrived her life in order that she might be here tonight in this dirty hotel room alone, waiting." Staring at the shape of a giant cockroach formed by a water stain on the ceiling, Karen concludes:

> If some men supposed themselves free it was only because they did not understand that they were imprisoned, bars could be made of any dreamy loss of light.

Max's doctor offers her sleeping pills, but Karen refuses, "If there was pain, she would feel it; it was hers." Falling asleep, she dreams of a child who has been growing inside a dusty closet where bright summer dresses hang — a child with plastic veins and a plastic heart. And she resolves not to cry for the death of that child, not to project meaning or seek comfort where none exists:

> Better to look into an empty drawer, stare into an empty hole, than to discover oneself looking into a darkness filled with shape.

Although Karen's dream, in incorporating her assent to the death of a child, foreshadows her desire for the miscarriage that will free her of Shar's baby, it is more significant in the narrative as a miniaturization of the dilemma in which she is enmeshed. Childhood is essentially a stultifying and confining condition, no matter how diverting and beautiful. Emergence involves, by definition, giving up the protection of the closet, the brightness of the summer dresses. Karen's resolution not to mourn the death of the child is a recognition and an acceptance of the pain inherent in the personal transformation toward which she moves. Significantly, the material from the unconscious, revealed in the dream, is incorporated in her deliberate actions later in the same way that in giving herself to Shar the first time she chose what she had earlier dreamed. On the day that she sends Shar to his death, Karen's memory of her suffering this night, and the hardening of heart to which it led her, is triggered by another cockroach shape on a wall.

Because Shar has become habituated to avoiding responsibility, his moral maturation must inevitably be more violent than Karen's. As the words *dream, fog, nightmare,* and *insanity* are associated with Karen when her destiny is out of her own control, so the words *victim, desperate, blind, trapped* and *possessed* now characterize Shar. Unlike Karen, who assumes the existence of a universal force she must resist, Shar believes his birth to have been an accident. On the racing circuit, where all his adult life has been spent, Shar has never needed to commit himself beyond the physical act — on the track or in bed. This fact has heretofore been a source of pride to him: now, with Karen, who withholds herself even in union, he feels trapped. Reading the newspapers over and over, he hopes that Karen's father will come for her, relieving him of the choice. Like Max, Shar at first deceives himself: he thinks that he controls Karen, that she echoes his statements and has no existence apart from him. At the same time he suffers from the knowledge of his own loss of control. Shar's last name seems, like Karen's, to function signally and ironically, for he struggles fatally to attain rule or control of his own destiny.

SHAR'S FIRST STEP toward the moral premeditation which produces the Nietzschean self-overcoming of the novel's epigraph ("What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil") is his imperfect awareness that in relation to Karen he feels "enchanted, desperate and incomplete". He is bewildered because, for the racer — the role in which he has until now found his identity — danger comes not from giving in to the inside, but from being drawn off centre by centrifugal force. Since he has dealt with Karen only as an extension of himself, Shar, who hungers for a communion with her and with the crowd that comes to see him race, does not yet know that for the individual whose existence is deliberate, the centre of being controls *all* actions. Only thus does one achieve the limited communion possible for man in the exile that is existence. It is in the condition of calculated action, which finally replaces accident in his life, that Shar embraces death as a transcendence — fulfilling the novel's title. Karen calls Shar's creation of his own death his manhood.

Neither brutality nor indifference can accomplish Shar's desired mastery over Karen. Their lovemaking becomes a battle of wills: in a terrible coupling where Shar takes her by force in a cemetery, Karen dominates — putting their actions into the realm of a dream, absolving herself, by an act of will, from any need to control what is happening to her body. At the instant of consummation, Karen looks — clear-eyed — into Shar's face. He is impaled, furious; even as the orgasm seizes him, he slaps her, sobbing:

> "Look at me like that, you little bitch!" . . . His face was white. . . . "I'd like to set you on fire like I did to *him*," he said, "take a match and set you on fire — burn everything — your clothes catching on and burning — you screaming for help, you little bitch! And all burning up, hair and insides, so you could see inside and see things burning there, melting away, burning — ".

In his desire to burn Karen, Shar reveals that the love/hate bond between them, which for Karen is the result of a nascent urge toward moral maturation, is as yet not different to him than his previous relationships — on the race track and in bed. In response to Karen's resistance Shar would like to invoke his habitual mode of violence as he had done in forcing his racing opponent into the flaming crash. Karen's response is diametrically opposite: She contracts herself into a "tiny pebble-like thing, safe in her brain". In his research in strivings toward psychic wholeness and in his analysis of mandala symbolism Jung found that a conflict rendered into images of stone is a positive human attitude toward the process of transformation.[6] For the person undergoing the individuation the unity of the imagined stone is a projection of the unified self toward which he strives. For Shar this defeat-in-victory of the deathly union in the cemetery provides the energy for his first step toward moral maturation: when Karen awakens the following morning he is gone. She is incredulous, for she had thought him "trapped, incapable of playing the game, unaware of its rules".

Tired, sick with the child that (unknown to Shar) is growing inside her, Karen is tempted to abandon the pursuit of a deliberate existence which must now, because she is obsessed with him, include Shar's death. She considers Max's offer of an abortion arrangement and $1000 in return for her going home, but such a bargain would leave Shar alive and the terrible attraction that threatens her freedom still viable. Contemplating this, Karen cries, "I am lost, I am lost," and once again the necessity of creating whatever meaning her life is to have is strengthened mnemonically as she re-experiences a childhood agony:

> She found herself thinking, inexplicably, as she sometimes did when Shar made love to her, of scenes of her childhood . . . she had not thought of for years. The proud pony one of the boys had ridden to school that time — why did she remember it now . . . How she had wanted a pony like that! How she had cried for it, crawling about her father's knees! "But why didn't he ever get it for me?" . . . She was struck by her father's queer injustice. She felt she could not forgive him that.

Karen's memory is of an injustice, a betrayal. Significantly, betrayal is also the emotion Karen associates with being swept up in passion for Shar. Now she resists the temptation to return to a life in which happiness can be withheld by another. Following Shar to Cherry River, she materializes before him as out of a dream.

Leaving Karen in Synderdale was Shar's first step in personal transformation,

and like Sisyphus discovering the absurd he experiences happiness in his heightened awareness of the limitations to which his existence is subject. The seed of knowledge that he now shares with Karen — that the individual must create his own destiny with an existence bounded by death — begins to expand within him. He tells his relief driver, "For them [the cars' owners] it's money and for me, waiting to die." And, as the sea and the sun take on great value for Sisyphus when he is commanded to return to the underworld, misanthropic Shar experiences a strange joy in his surroundings, "A damn good world! I can't get close enough to it — " he mutters. With this glimpse of joy inherent in his own freedom (and its attendant responsibility) Shar's life takes on a new complexity: he can no longer love and hate simply and immediately. Like Karen, he has left behind, in the world of his moral childhood, such clear distinctions. His life, like hers, will never again be the same. Now he contemplates the symbiotic relationship with Max which has relieved him of moral accountability — and moral freedom — his entire adult life. Like Karen who had rejected Max's settlement and returning to Eden County with "I am lost, I am lost," Shar thinks of Max and feels, for an instant, as if he were lost. And, just as Karen had done on the days immediately before leaving home, Shar surveys the world around him and wonders if he is insane. Karen, who survives Shar, will conclude that it *is* insane to look for meaning in existence — *and insane not to.*

The two women with whom Shar passes time in Cherry River occupy moral positions which contrast with that taken several months ago by Karen and now tentatively, reluctantly, embraced by the awakening Shar. Miriam, a big, slack Italian girl, contemplates the horror of rape/mutilation murders and freak shows with a morbid, unquestioning curiosity, "calmly and without much interest". She is both a foil for Karen and a facet of Shar's former self, insensitive and unspeculative. After a night together they both have ". . . white, brutal faces, pleased with each other". Miriam's passive acceptance of existence is conveyed powerfully by her reaction to a carnival freak show. She delights in the grotesque novelty of the Siamese twins suspended in alcohol and insists on watching a race among the armless, legless freaks. The carnival barker cries:

> Bo, Terry, Little Jo — here they are, just as they were born. They don't want your sympathy folks . . . they take their fate as it is, they accept their condition. They don't question the ways of our Maker and so why should we?

But Shar has begun to question. He cannot bear the sight: "Let's get the hell out of here," he moans. Miriam stays.

The second girl, a hostess whom Max sends to distract Shar before the race, is significantly nameless. She takes on an identity to please whatever man she is with and speaks of herself in passive voice, ". . . it was thought best for me . . .

I was told . . . it was decided". Shar quickly recognizes that Max has chosen her because she is ". . . a pale, bloodless parody of Karen".

Shar can neither return to the state in which Max absolves him of moral responsibility nor establish a relationship with the girls contrasted to Karen. Karen cannot accept the payoff Max offers and return home. For each a resumption of the old way would mean loss of the awakening self. And so they pursue the collision course which must result in the death of one. Karen uses the money Max gives her not for an abortion, but to follow Shar. Encountering her on the street, Shar leads Karen directly to his shabby room where he takes her with a simple violence that he believes will purge the emotion which overpowers him — "He did not know if it was anger or lust or joy," expecting from it a communion that will release him. He finds instead, betrayal. The pregnancy, unknown to Shar until Karen begins to miscarry, further disarms him. It has been a mock communion, but through it Shar realizes that, bad as existence is, *he* makes the choices that determine it: " 'A hell of a world,' Shar said suddenly and self-consciously, 'but at least it's my own fault' ". Moved as he has never been before, Shar begs Karen to stay, to marry him. Although it is a plea she has longed to hear, although she has just acknowledged her love for him, in the centre of Karen's consciousness remains the knowledge that capitulation would again put her destiny in the hands of another. Again memory intervenes — this time in the form of a delirious dream which links Shar with her father and the distress of childhood dependency:

> While Shar sat by the window and watched her, Karen was having a dream. She was running through grass, up the slope before her home to join her father; his face when he embraced her was always rough . . . She was going to cry to him that it was done, everything was finished, clean, she had come home, but when he gripped her she shrank suddenly in size and the air turned hot and humid . . . She was seized by him — how young she was! — and she realized then that someone else had held her, . . . Shar — it must have been Shar . . . But when she turned, the dream ended; she saw nothing. She grated her teeth in anger and dismay.

Once again incorporating the content of the unconscious which has come forward in the dream, Karen makes the extreme existential decision — that there is no fate which cannot be overcome by contempt. She says, in the calm, ordinary voice she had so despised in her sister, "You make me sick".

Once again Shar's reaction is rendered in terms aligning him with Sisyphus: Both exert their whole being and accomplish nothing. For Shar, as for Sisyphus, the lucidity that constitutes the torture also crowns the victory. Going directly from Karen's sickbed to the track, he experiences a surge of joy and love for the world, for Mitch his black assistant and for the crowd who he knows comes to see him die. In recognizing that the communion of violence the crowd seeks in

the race, like the communion of sexual possession he sought with Karen, is a mockery, Shar knows that he has been transformed:

> Shar's heart pounded with the excitement that he finally transcended the fragments of his anonymity. He wanted to get out and run back to Mitchie, or to Max, and explain to him: he knew who he was, he knew exactly what he was doing, and why; he was guilty — completely guilty — and his guilt, like his love, had pulled him together.

Karen has always known who she is; now Shar is also certain of his identity and in the transcendence made possible by choice, he accepts death: he hates the helmet, the fire-proofs suit he must wear — they are shock absorbers that disguise his humanity, devices invented for safety's sake — "as if there were any possible protection against mortality." This realization *is* Shar's psychic synthesis, his individuation. Pushing the traction limit of his racer to the invisible point at which control turns to chaos, he embraces death.

Karen has made a choice which will plunge her into a less final death — the madness that Oates calls the suicide of cowards.[7] As Shar leaves her room, Karen masters a powerful urge to call him back:

> She wanted him back, she did not care what he had done — She struggled out of bed ... Her blood pounding so furiously that she could not see ... Her vision cleared. She was staring across the corridor at something — it drew her gaze like a magnet. A fat cockroach crawling precariously up the wall ... Her mind was emptied ... She did not call after Shar. After a minute she realized she was listening to nothing, that he had left.

Memory has again kept Karen on the course of self-determination, for the cockroach she sees here, with terrible clarity of vision, conjures up the cockroach-shaped stain on the ceiling of the room in Synderdale and with it, the bitter suffering inherent in a state where happiness can be withheld by another. The hardness of heart Karen had resolved to maintain serves her well: she does not call Shar back.

The short final segment of the novel traces the five months of Karen's breakdown and recovery. She has known the extremes of abandonment of the self to the family and to religious ecstasy and she has known the self-containment which makes even love a threat to be met with violent resistance. Now she reaches a balance between hope and despair. Her physician calls her "self-cured." Returning to her father's house in early December, Karen enters again the morally somnolent world where the cycles of nature and the liturgical calendar inure one to unquestioning acceptance of the moral absolutes they symbolize. Parishioners who observe Karen at mass with her family interpret her pain-marked countenance as proofs of the justice of their universe, unable to comprehend that she has

suffered only because either way amounts to the same thing — it is insane to try to make sense of existence, and insane not to.

Karen knows, as Shar knew at the moment of his death, that no real communion is possible in life, a knowledge that allows her to choose the conformity that will unite her — as much as she can ever be united — with those who do not try to make sense of existence. She resolves to receive the sacrament with them the following week, but to protect herself from the thin splendour of church ritual which stands eternally ready to absolve her of individuality. She retains the terrible clarity of vision that impelled her to leave Eden County, to reject Shar and now to return home: Kneeling slowly, "Karen . . . forced her mind to stay clear." Of the alternatives now open to her, none is threatening for she concludes that whatever she becomes will be of her own doing.

Karen's final evaluation of her circumstances can be seen in the reordering of her vision of nature in Eden County. As the sense of an independent destiny grew within her last April she thought:

> In the worst days of winter the snow looked like an incredible sifting of earth and heaven, blotting out both earth and heaven, reducing them to an insane struggle of white that struck at human faces like knives. Summers reeked with heat and heaven pressed downward . . . There would be holocausts of fire in the woods . . . The brutality of the land somehow evoked joy in Karen.

Now she takes her father's arm as they leave the church. When she opens the door, ". . . the swirling snow . . . turned white and cold and innocent, like the disorder of her brain". Only in the implications of Karen's changed perceptions of the weather (the savage extremities that had once lured her are now harmless) and in her determination to retain clarity of mind can we make even a tenuous judgment of the degree to which her individuation will be consolidated and retained. She turns lovingly to the now feeble patriarch who would have taught her to murder. She agrees to re-enter the life of the family and to participate in the ritual of the church, but to guard her self-created state. She seems to know not only that there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn, but also that — if *she* chooses — there is no fate that cannot be borne with patience, endurance and love. Her knowledge has been dearly bought: Karen is a misfit and an alien, victim of her own stubborn integrity as surely as Shar has become the ultimate victim of his.

Jung points out that the task of creating a self can be accomplished only by the resolution of the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious through experience, never by understanding alone.[8] The integration of the unconscious in which we observe Karen Herz tends to induce panic in civilized people because of its relation to insanity — a fact of which Karen is keenly aware when she concludes that it is insane to look for meaning in existence and insane not to.

Further, the traditional and conservative spirit of society which is inimical to the acceptance of the unconscious still wears the earthly garment of the church and the father — most obdurately so in a rural and orthodox area such as Oates' Eden County. Therefore, in acknowledging the reality of the unconscious, that awakening force which moves her out of Eden County, and in attempting to make that darker side of the self which Jung calls the shadow,[9] a co-determining ethical factor in her life, Karen offends against the spirit of convention which for centuries has regulated the psychic life of the individual by means of the church and the family — the institutions against which she revolts.

Speaking of the inadequacy of what is legally, morally and socially approved to encourage — or even permit — the creation of a tenable sense of self, Jung says:

> Man's great task is the adaptation of himself to reality and the recognition of himself as an instrument for the expression of life according to his individual possibilities. It is in his privilege as self-creator that his highest purpose is found.[10]

and:

> The bringing together of the conscious and the unconscious is a task facing not only individuals, but whole civilizations. The political and social isms of our day preach every conceivable kind of ideal, but, under this mask, they pursue the goal of inhibiting the possibilities of individual development ... This problem cannot be solved collectively, because the masses are not changed unless the individual changes ... The bettering of a general ill begins with the individual, and then only when he makes himself and not others responsible.[11]

In *With Shuddering Fall* Oates has created a complex paradigm of the tension which exists between the entelechy of personal individuation and the societal forces resistant to it.

NOTES

[1] *With Shuddering Fall* was called "... a hysterically incoherent back country excursion into the world of madness" (K. G. Jackson, *Harpers*, Nov., 1964). Stanley Kaufmann considered the plot diluted Faulkner, an attempt to raise grade B movie material to epic level (*New York Review*, Dec. 17, 1964). John Knowles assumed the theme of the novel to be violence and the racing car Shar drives its symbol (NYTBR, Oct. 25, 1964). The four novels that followed (*A Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1966; *Expensive People*, 1968; *Them*, 1969 and *Wonderland*, 1971) were similarly received: James Doyle (of *The Critic*) referred to Oates as "Cather in the Raw" and praised her for taking up Frank Norris' imperative of understanding the plain people. Although here and there a reviewer suggested that the discarding of circumstantiality which flawed her apparent realism might indicate that Oates was working in another mode, not until the sixth novel (*Do With Me What You Will*, 1973) did a major review recognize that "Oates is a potent myth-maker in the drab guise of a social naturalist" (Calvin Bedient in NYTBR, Oct. 14, 1973).

[2] K. G. Jackson, John Knowles.

[3] Jung speaks of the personality as existing in a plural stage, i.e., not able to experience wholeness outside the community of the family or tribe, passive and unwilling or unable to assert its will, incapable of moral judgment *before* individuation. Individuation is the process of synthesis by which the personality brings into the consciousness those phenomena which are hidden from the ego but which, because they are a significant element in the psyche's content, must be acknowledged. Moral self-responsibility is attainable only through individuation.

[4] Many of the short stories in *By the North Gate* (1963) and *Upon the Sweeping Flood* (1966) have Eden County settings. The territory is topographically identifiable as the area of upstate New York where the author was raised.

[5] C. G. Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), pp. 316-17, 322.

[6] C. G. Jung, *Aion*, (Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 170.

[7] "Pastoral Blood," in *By the North Gate* is a paradigm for this novel: The protagonist, Grace, courts a violent consummation as a means of defining herself, expecting the union to end in her own death. But she does not die, and regaining consciousness, she scorns the ease of insanity as "the bloodless suicide for cowards."

[8] C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 51.

[9] The shadow is, according to Jung, that archetype which lies closest to the surface of the unconscious, the acceptance of which is the first step in the individuation process. Inherent in the dark aspects of the personality signified by the shadow are sexuality and self-determination (Jung, *Archetypes* . . . , p. 58 and *Aion*, p. 8).

[10] Jung, *Psychology* . . . , p. xlii.

[11] Jung, *Archetypes* . . . , p. 275.