

# The Truth of the Representation of Jeffrey Dahmer: Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie*

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In her essay “On Fiction in Fact,” Joyce Carol Oates (1938–) states that because writing is artificial, the representation of fact also cannot help being artificial and fictional (*Where* 76–7). One of her works in which this recognition of the representation of fact is concretely described is *Zombie* (1995). *Zombie* is a work of fiction which portrays a real-life serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dahmer, a gay man, killed 17 young men from 14 to 33 years of age between 1978 and his arrest in July, 1991. He had sex with the victims’ corpses, took their photographs, dismembered them, and sometimes cooked and ate them. When he was arrested, skulls, genitals and body parts soaked in chemicals and preserved in the refrigerator, and many photographs of the posed bodies and their parts, were found in his apartment. While serving a life sentence in prison, he was clubbed to death by the other prisoners in 1994.

Oates writes about serial killers, including Dahmer, in her essays — “Three American Gothics” and “‘I Had No Other Thrill or Happiness’: The Literature of Serial Killers” — in *Where I’ve Been, and Where I’m Going* (1999). In “The Literature of Serial Killers,” she comments on two non-fiction works about Dahmer: *The Man Who Could Not Kill Enough: The Secret Murders of Milwaukee’s Jeffrey Dahmer* (1992) by Anne E. Schwartz and *A Father’s Story* (1994) by Lionel Dahmer, Jeffrey Dahmer’s father. It can be seen that *Zombie* is based on these two non-fiction works.

Here, I analyze Oates’s opinions on the two non-fiction accounts, which she weaves into *Zombie*, in addition to her views on serial killers. Moreover, I dissect the postmodern representation of styles in *Zombie*. Steven Marcus explains the characteristics of the styles in *Zombie*: “Divided into 57 mini-chapters, composed with typographical tics and oddities (many capitalized

words, phrases and sentences; italics, ampersands and so forth), featuring crude and often pointless line drawings, ‘Zombie’ is Joyce Carol Oates’s effort to dramatize, in diarylike form, the psychotic, monstrous consciousness of a serial murderer” (13). In this essay, however, by regarding the use of such styles as Oates’s expression of her opinions on the representation of Dahmer in non-fiction accounts, I will reveal the significance of the use of such styles. Irving Malin and Philip L. Simpson state that in *Zombie*, the protagonist “Quentin” is named after Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929): “Quentin — named for Quentin Compson who isn’t sure where he ends and Caddie begins in *The Sound and the Fury* [ . . . ]” (Malin 572). “The book’s killer is named Quentin P\_\_, after Quentin Compson in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*” (Simpson 156). But what they notice is only this and they have not pursued the question of why Oates gives the protagonist of *Zombie*, who is a double of Dahmer, the name “Quentin.” Since she gives him the name “Quentin,” she seems to find similarities between Dahmer and Faulkner’s Quentin. Here, by illuminating the similarities, I will show the nature of the serial killer which Oates finds in Dahmer and the significance for her of representing it in words.

## I

Oates observes how the media deals with the Dahmer case: “Media fascination with lurid crimes feeds a seemingly insatiable sensation-hungry public, yet such treatments generally focus upon the criminal as freak, as monster; a ‘stranger’ in the midst of the presumably normal” (*Where* 233–4). Schwartz’s work is representative of the media in defining Dahmer “as freak, as monster; a ‘stranger’ in the midst of the presumably normal.”

Oates criticizes Schwartz’s superficiality and self-centered way of writing:

The [Schwartz’s] book’s tone is [ . . . ] suggesting the antic breeziness of a television cop program in which a clever, feisty female reporter is featured; it is informative as a daily newspaper is informative in an easy-access, quantitative way, with a good deal of ephemeral Milwaukee political gossip thrown in. There is little engagement with Dahmer as a subject, or with the phenomenon of the necrophiliac serial killer as anything but a celebrity-freak to be gawked at. Schwartz remains steadfastly

on the outside, as if to align herself with the most ingenuous of readers [ . . . ]. (*Where* 261)

The light tone of Schwartz's work here pointed out is incorporated into the representation of Quentin in *Zombie*.

In reading Schwartz's book, the reader can get a rough idea of Dahmer's crime. But as Oates states, Schwartz does not seem to try to uncover Dahmer's nature or the nature of his crime. In Schwartz's work, on the contrary, there are many parts where she emphasizes herself, discussing matters unrelated to the Dahmer case. For example, this occurs in the following episode, where only she could enter the scene of the crime:

I approached the open door of apartment 213 and stepped cautiously inside. Because most officers know me from three years of covering crime scenes, they have often beckoned me inside when other reporters were kept away by yellow tape that reads "POLICE LINE. DO NOT CROSS." The police have often shared details of a case with me because, although I could not print it because I worked for a family newspaper, they knew the information would fascinate me. (8)

In this way, the subject of Schwartz's description is consistently not Dahmer but herself. Her work comes across as an essay about her life as a reporter rather than an account of the Dahmer case. As a result, her representation of fact reads like a poor detective novel.

On the other hand, Lionel Dahmer's *A Father's Story* is a book of self-examination by Jeffrey Dahmer's father. The details of Dahmer's crime are hardly depicted in this work. In spite of it, Oates's estimation of this work is very high. As seen in the following citation, she identifies herself with the elder Dahmer: "Lionel Dahmer's 'confession' and his stringent self-censure are so disproportionate to his son's pathology as to seem bleakly and unintentionally comic, like blaming oneself for having slammed a door and precipitating an earthquake" (*Where* 263).

From the standpoint of the father who has the same genes as Dahmer, the elder Dahmer seeks the reason why his son carried out such cruel and inhuman acts. He frankly states his regret at not paying attention to his son's psychological and emotional state. The following citation shows the awkward

relationship between father and son:

I had come to accept the wall that separated me from my son. I had even come to think of it not so much as a wall, but as a shield which both of us needed if we were to communicate at all. [. . .] We would discuss only the most trivial things in life, and let all the more profound and troubling ones drop from our conversations. We would live in a world of shallow exchanges, and let everything else remain unsaid. (128)

By juxtaposing Schwartz's superficial narrative with the elder Dahmer's account, it can be seen that the representation of fact achieves completely different effects according to the writer's way of approaching the facts.

The representations of the Dahmer case by Schwartz and Dahmer's father are, however well-organized or poignant, only representations of fact constructed by third parties. In fact, Dahmer committed serial murder, was arrested, was tried, went to prison, and was killed. This progression of events seems to include cause and effect. But the essence of this case — why Dahmer did what he did — is unknowable, whatever the efforts of Schwartz, Dahmer senior, or Oates. Oates explains the difficulty of understanding the serial killer: "What an enigma, the 'serial killer' — he who murders not for monetary gain, which we might understand, but for passion's capricious sake! [. . .] So the serial killer like Jeffrey Dahmer remains a riddle, a koan, not simply in human terms but in biological terms as well" (*Where* 234–5). Judging from this statement, *Zombie* can be seen not as representing Dahmer and his crime but as expressing the impossibility of representing and understanding him. In *Zombie*, Oates creates the elusive Quentin to represent this impossibility, using postmodern techniques and adopting the tones of Schwartz's and Dahmer's father's accounts.

## II

Contrary to the seriousness and cruelty of the real Dahmer's crime, in Oates's story, Quentin is a light character who looks to make fun of people, society, and readers. This is because Oates projects "the antic breeziness" (*Where* 261) of Schwartz's work and the "bleakly and unintentionally comic" (*Where* 263) tone of Dahmer's father's work onto Quentin. This projection resulting in the character of Quentin, who pretends to be an obedient son,

brother, and grandson, suggests that representing and understanding Dahmer's nature and essence is an impossibility. Here, I analyze how Oates implies this by using postmodern techniques.

Various postmodern techniques of representation in *Zombie* such as italics, capital letters, ampersands, ideograms (\$), stars (★), cartoon illustrations, and a lot of blank spaces create for the reader a very fidgety, unstable, and flippant mood. For example, following is the scene where the probation officer, Mr. T\_\_, visits Quentin's apartment and checks his room:

I opened my locker door too & there was my calendar taped to the inside of the door with certain markings ★ ★ ★ & my T-shirts, work-shorts, jogging shoes etc. A strong clean smell of Lysol. [. . .] Mr. T\_\_ saying *Great, Quen-tin. Very neat & clean. Just right for you, eh?* Saying, *A little responsibility makes a man feel good, eh?* My muscle-mags & porn stuff I'd hidden away. & my Polaroids. & the map of SQUIRREL's bicycle route. (130)

As can be seen, the visual effects of the printing in *Zombie* lack unity and create a pop feeling as if the letters and various marks are frolicking about on the paper. *Zombie's* snappy styles of representation are the complete opposite of the story's serious content; there is a major gap between the appearance and the substance. This gap foregrounds the incongruity between the representations in the two non-fiction works and their contents. Malin describes Oates's postmodern representation: "Quentin [. . .] plays with words. Thus he says Quent-in; he explodes capital letters; he violates the typeface, not willing to be held by the 'prison'/text. He delights in drawing ice-picks, faces — he *defaces* the page" (572). Instead of the representation of Dahmer, which is closed in the "'prison'/text" of the image "as freak, as monster: a 'stranger' in the midst of the presumably normal" by Schwartz and the media, the representation of Quentin seems to run about in all directions on the page of *Zombie*.

Brian McHale explains the "deliberate nonfluency" of postmodernist writing: "Characteristic of postmodernist writing is what might be called the device of deliberate nonfluency: the construction of sentences so awkward (to the point of ungrammaticality) that it is the sentence-structure itself that fixes the attention, distracting us from whatever content that structure might carry" (154). In *Zombie*, there are many parts composed of words, phrases, and

clauses which are punctuated by periods, though they should be unified as one sentence. Conversely, there are also many parts unified into one sentence by ampersands, parts which would normally be divided into shorter sentences. Moreover, this novel includes a lot of slang, obscene words, and taboo words such as “nigger,” “dope,” “whitey,” “ass,” “asshole,” “hard-on,” “cock,” “dick,” “fucking,” “piss,” and “shit.” The abundance of informal expressions creates a vulgar effect. As McHale states, such elements disturb the novel’s natural fluency. In addition, *Zombie* seems to produce the lightness of pulp fiction by using such structure and words, reflecting Oates’s nod to Schwartz’s work: “[ . . . ] it is informative as a daily newspaper is informative in an easy-access, quantitative way [ . . . ]” (*Where* 261).

The narrator in *Zombie* calls himself “I” or “Q\_\_P\_\_” or “Quentin.” That simultaneously depicts Lionel Dahmer’s representation of his son, who is uninterested in everything, and the distance between Dahmer and Schwartz as her work produces a representation of herself rather than Dahmer. Dahmer’s father describes his son’s situation when he visited him in jail:

It was impossible to tell whom he felt sorry for, or what he felt sorry about. He could not even imitate regret, much less truly feel it. Remorse was beyond him [ . . . ].

[ . . . ] his general remoteness no longer looked like shyness, but like disconnection, the opening of an unbridgeable abyss. His eyes no longer struck me merely as expressionless, but as utterly void, beyond the call of the most basic forms of sympathy and understanding, beyond even the capacity to ape such emotions. (183–4)

Here can be seen Dahmer’s father’s anguish at his inability to understand his son’s emotion, together with his doubt as to whether his son really feels any emotion.

This view can be regarded as similar to Fredric Jameson’s view of the post-modern world:

[ . . . ] that concepts such as anxiety and alienation [ . . . ] are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. The great Warhol figures [ . . . ] the notorious cases of burnout and self-destruction of the ending 1960s, and the great dominant experiences of drugs and schizophrenia, would seem to have little enough in common any more either with the

hysterics and neurotics of Freud's own day or with those canonical experiences of radical isolation and solitude, anomie, private revolt, Van Gogh-type madness, which dominated the period of high modernism. This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation.

Such terms inevitably recall one of the more fashionable themes in contemporary theory, that of the "death" of the subject itself — the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual — and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche. (14–5)

As seen from the elder Dahmer's descriptions, he cannot integrate the fragmented interior of his son — the obedient attitude toward his father, the soberness at his office, the cunning of luring the victims into his apartment, the cruelty of committing murder, and the calmness of dealing with dead bodies — into the representation of his son as a subject. Rather, he seems to recognize the death of his son as subject. This suggests that his son's interior cannot be represented through the precepts of modernism, where it is taken for granted that there is something to be implied at the bottom of the things and at the back of the representation. To represent Dahmer requires an acceptance of the fragmentation and death of the subject in the postmodern world. In *Zombie*, what lurks behind the narrator's calling himself "I" or "Q\_\_ P\_\_" or "Quentin" is the difficulty of grasping Dahmer as a definitive subject.

Another probable reason for the variation in the narrator's references to himself is Oates's criticism of Schwartz's onlooker-like approach to Dahmer. As discussed previously, Oates takes Schwartz to task for her light narrative. Because Schwartz's work reads like an essay on her own life as a reporter, it can be thought that Oates shifts her question about whether Schwartz's subject is Dahmer or Schwartz herself to the question of whether the subject in *Zombie* is really "I" or "Q\_\_ P\_\_" or "Quentin." Oates's satire of Schwartz's stubborn onlooker-like attitude toward the Dahmer case can be seen in Quentin's attitude as he narrates his own story as if it were another person's story.

These characteristically postmodern representations in *Zombie* are the out-

comes of Oates's opposition to the representation of Dahmer by the media "as freak, as monster; a 'stranger' in the midst of the presumably normal" and of her recognition of Dahmer's interior as an enigma. Oates's views can also be supported by Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which is regarded as having laid the foundation for postmodernism:

Totalization can be judged impossible in the classical style: one then refers to the empirical endeavor of either a subject or a finite richness which it can never master. There is too much, more than one can say. But nontotalization can also be determined in another way: no longer from the standpoint of a concept of finitude as relegation to the empirical, but from the standpoint of the concept of *play*. If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field — that is, language and a finite language — excludes totalization. [ . . . ] One could say [ . . . ] that this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center's place in its absence — this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified. (365–6)

This theory corroborates the limit of the elder Dahmer's effort to write about his son, an effort that is circumscribed by the extent of his experiential cognizance. Moreover, it also shows the limit of the representation of Schwartz's work, where she can only say of Dahmer that she "was astonished at how normal this man looked and sounded" (216). These two works are written in the belief that there is a totalizable core to the Dahmer case and Dahmer himself. But as Derrida states, even if one tries to totalize this case and Dahmer's humanity through representation, one can only show the gap between Dahmer's appearance and the cruelty of his crime, as Schwartz does, or the lack of Dahmer's core humanity as Dahmer's father does, without ever reaching the core of Dahmer's interior.

Derrida also states that "the absence of the transcendental signified extends

the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (354). What Oates carries out in *Zombie* is just this. Since "the transcendental signified," namely Dahmer's transcendental interior, is absence to Oates, Quentin in *Zombie* is represented as a vague character who seems to defy definitive interpretation. In other words, to Oates, Dahmer's interior is not one which can be arrived at through representation but rather, one which can only be diffused because Dahmer's interior (the center) is the enigma (the absence), or something which can only be deconstructed.

In *Zombie* Oates suggests postmodern concepts by showing the impossibility of representing fact through the use of various postmodern styles of representation.

### III

Here, a comparison of Faulkner's Quentin, Oates's Quentin and Dahmer will illuminate what of Faulkner's Quentin Oates finds in Dahmer and how she represents it in *Zombie's* Quentin. As a result, the serial killer nature Oates finds in Dahmer and the significance to her of representing it in words will be revealed.

Faulkner describes the character of Quentin in "Appendix Compson: 1699–1945," which includes the history of the Compsons and a sequel to *The Sound and the Fury*:

Who [Quentin] loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast globy earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal. Who loved not the idea of the incest which he would not commit, but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment: he, not God, could by that means cast himself and his sister both into hell, where he could guard her forever and keep her forevermore intact amid the eternal fires. But who loved death above all, who loved only death, loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death as a lover loves and deliberately refrains from the waiting willing friendly tender incredible body of his beloved, until he can no longer bear not the refraining but the restraint and so flings, hurls himself, relinquishing, drowning. (1131–2)

Faulkner's Quentin cannot face up to the loss of his sister Caddy's virginity and so he fantasizes about incest with her. François L. Pitavy sees Quentin as the image of the artist: "His hypersensitivity confers upon his vision of the world a lucidity, even though desperate [ . . . ] he has more to say because he sees and understands or feels more, and also because he appears as an image of the artist [ . . . ] a projection of the *poet's* demiurgic power" (82). Is there some similarity between Faulkner's Quentin, who is hypersensitive and a kind of artist as Pitavy states, Dahmer, and the flippant Quentin in *Zombie*?

Oates states that the serial killer is a fantasist, and finds a similarity between the serial killer and the artist:

The psychopathic serial killer is a deep fantasist of the imagination, his fixations cruel parodies of romantic love and his bizarre, brutal acts frequently related to cruel parodies of "art." The serial killer's immersion in fantasy; his apparent helplessness in the face of his compulsion — in some cases [ . . . ] the killer claims to hear demotic voices; the ritualistic and totemic elements of his grotesque "art"; the seemingly insatiable need to orchestrate, and reorchestrate, a drama of hallucinated control; the mystical-erotic "high" released by the consummation, after a lengthy period of premeditation — all suggest a kinship, however distorted, with the artist. It is as if the novelist, playwright, visual artist were incapable of translating his fantasy into words or images but was compelled, by powerful unconscious urges, to locate living individuals to perform for him, at his bequest. (*Where* 255)

As seen from Faulkner's statement, his Quentin loves abstract concepts such as death, honor, and eternal punishment. Moreover, he "loved and lived in a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death." These views seem similar to Dahmer's. Dahmer loved not real people with emotions but the concept of controlling people completely, such that he could only love dead bodies and their parts. Though in the case of Faulkner's Quentin, "a deliberate and almost perverted anticipation of death" means the anticipation of his own death, in the case of Dahmer, it means the anticipation of his victims' death. In other words, Oates imagines Dahmer's perverted and mad love for the same sex and his artistic imaginative power overlapping with Faulkner's Quentin's perverted love for his sister Caddy and his artistic nature.

The way in which Oates's Quentin grasps time is completely different from

that of Faulkner's Quentin. Oates's Quentin is indifferent to the past; as he states: "Fuck the PAST, it's NOT NOW. Nothing NOT NOW is real" (18). On the other hand, Faulkner's Quentin seems to believe in concepts such as the past and eternity. The following is what his father says to him in their conversation. The content suggests that Quentin regards the past as important: "It [the watch] was Grandfather's and when Father gave it to me he said I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; it's rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the *reducto absurdum* of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's" (935). Moreover, Quentin's confessing his incest fantasy with his sister Caddy to his father implies that he believes in the concept of eternity:

[ . . . ] you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard you will not even be dead and i temporary and he you cannot bear to think that someday it will no longer hurt you [ . . . ] it is hard believing to think that a love or a sorrow is a bond purchased without design and which matures willynilly and is recalled without warning to be replaced by whatever issue the gods happen to be floating at the time no you will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair perhaps and i i will never do that nobody knows what i know [ . . . ] (1013–4)

Pitavy comments on Quentin's respect for the past and eternity:

The fascination with eternity is the other major force polarizing Quentin's vision and determining his mental images. Permanence or motionless balance, sexual innocence [ . . . ] or damnation [ . . . ] are, in Quentin's view, the opposite of change, of irremediable time, and of sexuality [ . . . ] — the opposite of temporariness, to use again the word that comprehends all his obsessions. (87–8)

Thus, Faulkner's Quentin's concept of time is opposite to Quentin's in *Zombie*.

Then, how does Dahmer grasp the past and eternity? Oates explains his preservation of mementos of his murders:

There is the impulse, too, to memorialize an "erotic" interlude by way of

mementos or souvenirs, or even art; the grotesque exaggeration of the lover's mock-wish to "devour" the beloved that manifests itself in actual acts of cannibalism. Dahmer [ . . . ] seems to have had artistic impulses of a kind, painting the skulls of some of his victims, taking Polaroid shots of their dismembered bodies arranged as "still lifes." [ . . . ] He explained that he wanted to keep his victims with him [ . . . ]. (*Where* 234)

Dahmer's acts reveal that he cherishes the past with his victims and wants them to exist for eternity. *Zombie's* Quentin also keeps mementos of his victims, such as "RAISINEYES' funky leather slouch-brim hat," "BUNNY-GLOVES' soft-bunny-fur-lined leather gloves," "BIG GUY's frames" (78), and NO-NAME's gold tooth (84). But the significance of every memento for him is as "one of Q\_\_ P\_\_'s most prized good-luck charms" (84). His motive for collecting mementos of his victims is obviously different from Dahmer's. In other words, Dahmer differs from *Zombie's* Quentin, who does not regard the concept of the past as important. In the recognition of the concept of time, Dahmer is similar to Faulkner's Quentin.

Thus, it can be said that the reason why Oates gives the name "Quentin" to the protagonist of *Zombie* is that she finds in Dahmer's perverted mind the artistic nature and the purity of believing in eternity of Faulkner's Quentin. But Oates does not incorporate these traits into *Zombie's* Quentin. She only implies them by the name "Quentin." She recognizes that it is impossible to represent Dahmer's mind and interior by words and therefore, through borrowing the name of an existing character, Faulkner's Quentin, she suggests Dahmer's nature. Here can be seen Oates's resistance to the media, including Schwartz, which represents Dahmer "as freak, as monster; a 'stranger' in the midst of the presumably normal" — a stereotyped image. What lies behind the name "Quentin" is Oates's realization of the limit and the uncertainty of representation through words.

Oates can only deconstruct the serial killer Dahmer's nature because she perceives that she cannot really understand it. By using various postmodern styles of representation, she attempts to represent Dahmer's inexpressible nature through the character of Quentin in *Zombie*. Moreover, she makes the name "Quentin" reflect the mind of Faulkner's Quentin, a character that

evokes the image of the artist Oates finds in Dahmer.

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