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Victims of Violence in Joyce Carol Oates' "Heat"

Abstract

The article entitled Victims of Violence in Joyce Carol Oates' "Heat" explores violence, sexual assault and child murder which occur frequently in our society, yet it is unnoticed and forgotten. Menace, molestation and murder are the consistent elements in the works of Joyce Carol Oates. Women, particularly female children, become the target of abuse and are victimised. Men inflict pain on women, satiate their sensual pleasure, even kill them, but these perpetrators of violence never repent nor realise their wrongdoings. This paper seeks to explore how the child molester leads a life unaffected while the abused are in the coffin, dead.

The more that we choose not to talk about domestic violence, the more we shy away from
the issue, the more we lose

- Russell Wilson

The inspiration to portray the most contemporary issue, child abuse, comes from the society. Joyce Carol Oates' works dealing with abuse in any form is a reflection of the society. Her works are shaded with assault, rape, mutilation, and murder; break away from the monotonous convention and focus on the sexual exploitation of women which goes uncared for. When questioned why her writing is violent, Joyce Carol Oates says, "People often say I write about violence, but fundamentally I have written about the aftermath of violence, often in the lives of women and children who are the victims. How do they deal with it? How do they survive?" Oates' expression of the molestation is not just words but everyday physical reality of women undergoing pains and pangs.

Oates shows how appearance can be deceptive and men use their deception to gratify their carnal desires by exploiting the children. Children are abused mostly by the people whom they know. They easily fall victim to the traps of the molesters and can never break themselves free from the clutches. The children would either die in the trap or remain psychologically trapped even after breaking free. The victims' invisible scars remain, suffocating them till their last breath. But the child molester is inculpable and indifferent, leading a peaceful life.

The short story "Heat" is about the sexual assault and murder of lively and fun-loving teenage twins, Rhea and Rhoda Kunkel, recounted through the eyes of their childhood friend (narrator). The murder of the twins is not charged with any penalty as he is mentally retarded. As a retarded person, Roger Whipple can rape, kill the girls and can hide their corpse under a canvas in his father's ice factory, but cannot remember the incident or what he has done to them. The

irony is that he is a nineteen-year-old boy with sixth grader's mental ability who does not know to deal with his own sexuality. He is not blamed, cornered or questioned because he is a mentally unstable person who can but rape.

Rhea and Rhoda, eleven-year-old angels, lie together in the coffin: "The twins in twin caskets, white, smooth, gleaming, perfect as plastic, with white satin lining puckered like the inside of a fancy candy box" (543-544). They wanted to be together always and fate too has not betrayed them. The mischievous twins always have their way of dealing with things, their thoughts are similar, they dream the same dream together, and even their bicycles are laid down together facing the same direction. They are always together; never can one see them alone without the other. Rhoda's anger rises up when left alone as Roger accompanies her sister Rhea to his room upstairs. She can sense something is wrong or something wrong may occur. If Rhea had agreed to Rhoda's request to go along with them to Roger Whipple's room, they would not have been dead now. Together they would have found a way to escape his lecherous whim.

"Heat", the short story's title, is both physical and carnal. It refers to the sultry weather that cobwebs the town: "The heat was gauzy; you had to push your way through like swimming" (544). It refers to the heat between the narrator and her ex lover; the flush of emotions Roger Whipple underwent upon seeing the twins. Roger Whipple is a teenage boy, working in his father's Ice shop. Before the incident of rape and murder, he is shown as harmless and a soft guy doing his chores and working in the Ice factory, never complaining. Children around the town would visit Whipple's Ice to quench the hot summer and Roger would not mind being teased by them: "He was happy with children that age, he was that age himself in his head— sixth grade learning abilities" (546).

With the ability and mindset of a sixth grader, poor Roger cannot resist the temptations of the Kunkel twins. With the label of a mentally disabled person, poor Roger can trick the girls to rape and murder them. Poor Roger Whipple can easily get himself out of the trail with this label on him. So it is quite clear that, men, not all, but those sexual predators and molesters without conscience, will continue to hunt down female children and women as no charges against them stand a trial at court. They escape through bribing or labeling themselves as mental handicaps. Even if they get caught red handed, they do not seem to realise their error, nor do they repent for it.

Waiting seems like eternity. Furious and being left alone, Rhoda decides to leave her twin sister. She rides her cycle back home cursing and wishing Rhea “was dead and gone” (552), without knowing her wish will befall on her sister; without realising that, “Death was coming for them, but they didn’t know” (544), they both will be killed. Even in death, they are together. If Rhoda had gone up the moment her sister went inside Roger’s room or had called someone nearby to open the shut door and window, or if the dreams they witnessed together had warned them the previous night, the gruesome death would have been prevented and the wild, prank-loving, freckle skinned Kunkel twins would have wandered throughout town and lighted up the lives around. But now they rest “on their backs with their eyes closed, and their mouths, the way you don’t always look in life when you’re sleeping. Their faces were too small. Every eyelash showed, too perfect. Like angels, everyone was saying, and it was strange it was *so*” (544-545).

The entire story is seen through the eyes of the narrator who is an adult now. She recalls her childhood friends who died a horrible death. She recollects, after the twin’s death, how her mother would hug her reciting prayers to protect her from the unknown danger; how her parents,

after she has slept, would check on her if she is doing okay. The invisible fear can be seen and sensed in almost all the parents. But one cannot predict what life has in its bag.

Roger Whipple dies at the age of thirty one, after twelve years of the twin's murder. At the outset, before the murder in public opinion, he is a sweet and gentle boy. But his true colours seem to show up with the company of Rhea and Rhonda. This nature of him is unknown in the town, which results in the outcome of the crimes. His case gets dismissed and he simply does not know what have happened to the girls. Oates writes,

Roger Whipple said he didn't remember any of it. Whatever he did, he didn't remember. At first everybody thought he was lying; then they had to accept it as true, or true in some way: doctors from the state hospital examined him. He said over and over he hadn't done anything and he didn't remember the twins there that afternoon, but he couldn't explain why their bicycles were at the foot of his stairway and he couldn't explain why he'd taken a bath in the middle of the day. The Whipples admitted that wasn't a practice of Roger's or of any of them, ever, a bath in the middle of the day. (550)

In the ending, the narrator admits that she has an affair with a man after her marriage. Their private meeting would be behind the deserted icehouse. When she is in his car, a gust of memories swirl around her as she is reminded of what had happened to the twins in Roger Whipple's room: "I wasn't there, but some things you know" (556). She can predict the unpredictable.

Life's greatest fear is the fear of death. Everyone would want to live life to the fullest which is their ultimate desire. But before their inevitable death, they would like to achieve their goal or fulfil their dreams in this uncertain life. Enduring pain while being raped and its

aftermath can weaken the victim emotionally and physically. The victim of abuse dies a slow death reminiscing the past bitter incidents, later facing criticism and insult from the society. Both Rhea and Rhoda are lucky to have faced death than to slip into mental breakdown and trauma stricken life in future. Oates, through this story, wants to sensitize her readers about the brutality faced by female victims, especially children. She uses her stories to cleanse the society off the violence against women.

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