

ANALYSIS

Black Water (1992)



Joyce Carol Oates

(1938-)

“With *Black Water* (1992), Joyce Carol Oates has carried to an even further degree her break with the Realism [Naturalism] of her earlier work, for example in *them*. Here she speaks out as Mary Jo Kopechne, the young woman unfortunate enough to get into a car with Ted Kennedy, in 1969, when he was drunk, out of control, and inattentive. She drowned; he saved himself. The break with traditional Realism occurs in several ways: in the freely associative passages where Mary Jo (here Kelly Kelleher) muses on her life and death; in the hallucinatory passage of the Toyota as it hurtles rocket-like toward doom with the drunk, careless Senator at the wheel; in Kelly’s slow passage toward death as the air bubble in the submerged car begins to recede and with it her life.

In another respect, the funereal ride is the mirror image of the one in *The Great Gatsby*, with Daisy Buchanan at the wheel and Gatsby the fall guy. Reversed genders, similar results. In Oates’s presentation of the ‘case,’ Kennedy is the ‘Senator,’ described as recognizably Ted: robust to overweight, face filled with veins from years of drinking, the superficial charm of power and famous connections, attitude suffused with the kind of carelessness which recalls, once again, the Buchanans in the Fitzgerald novel, the carelessness of the rich.

What makes Oates’s telling so incisive is the way in which she juxtaposes Kelly’s awe of the senator and her desire to seem attractive to him with his abandonment of all but his desire to score. As a means to getting laid, he pays attention to her; an attention that she thinks goes deeper. In her eyes, he has singled her out as someone special; whereas in his eyes she is just another conquest in a long line of women the Kennedys have considered their property. Power is their thing, and while it draws Kelly to the senator, it is also what helps kill her: for the senator is focused on power, whether over her, the Toyota, or simply in general. A young pretty woman is a way to exercise that power, and he drives his case with her as hard as he drives the Toyota. Oates’s description of the senator at the wheel of the car approximates a kind of sexual play, as he brakes and gives gas to the engine, in bursts, while the car surges, falters, picks up, drops off; and, finally, when the sexual energy is gone, the car sinks into the muddy waters where Kelly drowns.

The hallucinatory quality of the novel [Expressionism], and the concomitant move into the newer realism, occurs primarily when Kelly flashes back—she has in actuality died, but Oates keeps her mind moving along her routine, her preparations, clothes, makeup, perfume. This touch reinforces Kelly as an innocent in the mating game who has completely misread the senator as someone interested in *her*, when he is of course interested in young women. She is his fling of the moment, someone he can readily charm with his position and male aggressiveness (masked by what seems to be an interest in her). As she drowns—as she in fact has drowned—she awaits his saving arms; she claws at the idea of his returning to pry her from imprisonment in the car seat. Her mind is on life, even as the senator has saved only himself. As he moves toward his damage control team, her air bubble having been exhausted, she fills with muddy, oily, scummy fluid entombing the car. Like a foetus trapped in its own amniotic fluid, she has been discarded by her ‘parent’ figure, the senator old enough to be her father. She is Iphigenia in his Agamemnon quest for power: once the accident occurs, he must get his support team into action so that he can sail back to his old role as a notable statesman.

In several respects, Kelly has bonded with the senator as someone standing in for her father: she has written her undergraduate thesis on him (one is amused at Brown University having sanctioned such a topic), and she sees him as the liberal father of the Democratic welfare system—the father of us all. She seeks, as his daughter-to-be, to learn from him—he will tutor her in the ways of the world and all the while shield her. But of course his interest is less than father and more like lover, an in-and-out lover at that. The young woman who graduated summa cum laude, with a thesis entitled ‘Jeffersonian Idealism and “New Deal” Pragmatism: Liberal Strategies in Crisis’ (a kind of Groucho Marx title), is attempting now to act grown-up. A good Catholic girl, she protests to her parents that she can take care of herself—and so she does, with a willfulness that kills her. In Oates’s hands, the senator is all attitude, above the law, one part turned toward the electorate, the other turned toward ‘black water’ where terrible things recur in his life. Two-faced, he will escape. One-faced, Kelly will suck up the remaining air and then suffocate when he has left her nothing to breathe. The senator has sought a young woman for amusement in a motel, but has instead dispatched her back into a womb, a dead foetus.

Having avoided the traditional realistic route, Oates had found the new perfect vehicle for her rage: rage at Kelly for believing a man, for following him into what she thought would be a pleasure dome, and for believing in him even after he has abandoned her in the deep. She has filtered Kelly’s first person voice as hopeful victim, and she has added her own comments, in the third person, but by way of Kelly’s mental processes even as they are being snuffed out. Italics create a kind of transitional language between Kelly’s own story, which she strives to locate and tell, and Oates’s, which of course encompasses Kelly’s and the senator’s. We see the senator through Kelly’s adoring eyes, even as he plans his escapade, that weekend’s screw. Black water is the fate of any woman who believes a man, and black water is doubly the fate of any woman who believe in a politician. If the politician is a Kennedy, one can expect to be wasted.”

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