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"*WIDOW* TRUMPS ALL OTHER IDENTITIES": THE PORTRAIT OF A WIDOW IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S *A WIDOW'S STORY: A MEMOIR* AS A REFLECTION OF SELECTED LINGUISTIC, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF WIDOWHOOD

This article looks at the identity of the widow from linguistic, cultural, psychological, and literary perspectives. The basis of this analysis is Joyce Carol Oates's grief narrative *A Widow's Story: A Memoir*. First, the term "widow" and its connotations are examined and illustrated by appropriate examples from Oates's memoir and psychological research. Next, I present an overview of the situation of the widow in selected developing countries where the state of widowhood becomes a serious deterrent to forming a new identity after a loss. Finally, I address the definitions of the widow in Joyce Carol Oates's memoir, *A Widow's Story: A Memoir*.

KEYWORDS: widow, identity, loss, bereavement, self

"*My husband died, my life collapsed*";
"*I am not anything now. Legally I am a 'widow' … But beyond that – I am not sure that I exist*"
(Oates 2012: 1, 243)

Significant changes of identity after a loss have been studied by multiple grief scholars, and volumes have been written on how to recover from a loss of a spouse, child, parent, etc. There seems, however, to be an increasing need for bereavement literature that reflects the loss and rebuilding of one's life on a more personal level. For the past fifteen years, the modern bereavement memoir has been gaining in popularity, and within this fast-growing genre, grief accounts by widowed women of different ages predominate. Many of these bereft authors portray how a significant loss influences one's personality and attempt to define the social and cultural status of the widow. The basis of this analysis is Joyce Carol Oates's grief narrative *A Widow's Story: A Memoir*. Oates's portrayal of the widowed self is by

no means a generic formula for all widows in Western culture, yet she brings to the reader's attention crucial issues concerning widowhood and identity that other grief memoirists, psychologists, and sociologists discuss as well. I first examine the term "widow" and its connotations, many of which encapsulate the emotions and position of the widow across times and cultures. Appropriate examples from Oates's story illustrate the meanings discussed in this section. Next, I present an overview of the situation of the widow in selected developing countries where the state of widowhood becomes a serious deterrent to forming a new identity after a loss. This additional data regarding the less than ideal status of a bereaved woman in other than Western societies serves as a point of comparison to Oates's experiences and psychological bereavement research. Finally, I address the definitions of the widow in Oates's bereavement narrative. As with the process of grief, the concept of widowhood is complex and challenging. Therefore, this analysis should not be read as a universal portrait of widowhood. My focus is a particular literary genre – memoirs by bereaved women from English-speaking countries who suffered a significant loss. Even though there are optimistic, even humorous, streaks in this kind of writing, the portrait of the fractured self most of these authors paint does not constitute light reading. Ultimately, however, Oates's memoir as well as other literary bereavement records are success stories about survival and rebuilding one's life after the loss of a beloved person.

THE WIDOW: SELECTED ETYMOLOGIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE WORD

The English word "widow" derives from the old Anglo-Saxon *wydewe* (*widuwe, wuduwe*), which from the mid-15th century came to denote not only a widow but also a "woman separated from or deserted by her husband" (*Online Etymology Dictionary* 2017). The Latin word *vidua* denotes "widow" or "an unmarried woman" and is the feminine of *vidŭŭs* meaning "bereaved," "widowed," "deprived," "empty," "without," "without a lover," "lonely," and "missing someone" (*Słownik* 1979: 537). The sensation of emptiness and loneliness that the figure of the widow signified in ancient societies is also visible in the Hebrew word of the Holy Scriptures, (אַלְמָנָה), transliterated as *almanah*, and pronounced *al-maw-naw*. The word literally means "an empty house" or "desolate palace" (*Bible Hub* 2017). *Almanah* is the feminine of *alman* ("widowed," "forsaken"), and the root word for both is *alam*, which, according to the *New American Standard Bible* translation, means "to bind," "(become) speechless, mute, silent," and "binding" (*Bible Hub*, "Alam").

The above meanings find their reflection in how widows were perceived and how they might have reacted to grief in the past. Many of these connotations and bereavement patterns can also be observed today. Deprivation and emptiness, often

consolidated into one word – loneliness, are what many widows feel at different points of their bereavement. Although each grief is different, multiple studies and interviews with widows in Western cultures confirm that the feeling of the self being lost and fractured due to a void created by loss can persist for weeks, months, or even years. Among the most common phrases that the bereaved women use are: "I have nobody. I am alone. I feel there's only me" (Hoonaard 2001: 39); "When I was married I was somebody. Now I am no one"; "I feel so empty and lost. I think ahead and the whole thing feels like a black hole" (Silverman 2004: 48, 115); "I feel so all alone now. It's been like the world has ended" (Worden 2009: 21); "*I am not anything now. … I am not sure that I exist*" (Oates 2012: 243).

The emotional emptiness that a widow feels encompasses social roles (she is no longer a wife, lover, etc.), activities and chores (the husband might have been the main accountant or cook in the family); and places (many locations remind the widow of her loss). The empty home, which many widows come back to day after day, is a powerful symbol of absence and a harsh reminder of a changed life. The process of inward and outward emptiness playing off each other in the psyche of the bereaved is aptly encapsulated in the Hebrew term *almanah*, denoting the widow and an "empty house." "I am anxious when I am alone, yet I yearn to be alone," states Oates, "the empty house is terrifying to me yet when I am away from it, I yearn to return to it" (2012: 94). Oates frequently refers to how the empty rooms, which she calls "ghost rooms," haunt her. Empty spaces and their haunting qualities are not the only tangible effects of grief. Many of the bereaved experience a somatic sensation of hollowness in the stomach (Worden 2009: 23) and continue to feel emotionally and physically empty and exhausted to the point that they feel like ghosts, wraiths, or zombies, all of which greatly influences their perception of who they are or, rather, who they are not any more. A day after her husband's death, in an email to a friend, Oates states: "*I am inundated with tasks to be done – like a zombie plodding through the interminable day*" (2012: 85). Even when the first shock of grief passes, the emotional and physical emptiness may continue, and Oates addresses this state of mind and body throughout her memoir.

The emptiness one struggles with after a loss finds an additional reflection in "the empty chair technique," frequently employed by therapists to work through the griever's feelings of deprivation, loneliness, anger etc. In this directed imagery method, the therapist helps the bereaved visualize the deceased sitting in an empty chair, and then encourages the patient to say what she needs to say to him (Worden 2009: 107). The effectiveness of the technique comes from the fact that the bereaved can address the dead loved one directly instead of merely talking *about* the deceased and the emptiness the deceased left behind (cf. Worden 2009: 107). The empty space is filled, at least temporarily, and the grieving person feels that the emptiness can be handled by such imagining. Many therapists report that widows tend to talk to their dead spouses during everyday activities to fill the emptiness. If not too excessive, talking to a dead person does not mean one is delusional – it is

a way of commemorating the deceased that can efficiently facilitate the adjustment to a new life.

The preposition "without" (*vidua*, the Latin root of *wydewe*) becomes an inherent part of a widow's life, often for an extensive period of time. She has to adjust to the idea of what it is like to live not only *without* her husband, but also *without* most things he represented, endorsed, and contributed to during their life together. "I can't live without him" is a common statement after a loss. In her grief account, Oates also underlines such a sentiment: "[W]ithout Ray, there doesn't seem much point to anything I do" (2012: 209). The full realization of this "without-ness" resurfaces around two to three months after a loss and involves coming to terms with living alone, raising children *without* the loved one, managing finances *without* the support of the other, etc. (cf. Worden 2009: 46). Psychologists also emphasize the "without-ness" of widowhood when they talk about the task of "adjusting" to the world "without" the deceased (Worden 2009: 4, 46, 166).

The meaning embedded in the Latin word *vidua* succinctly captures the situation of the widow on yet another level. Even though it seems unfathomable to a newly widowed woman to continue life without her husband, she may also want to be alone for an extended period of time, *without* people bothering her with trite condolences or meaningless talk (see Worden 2009: 27–28). A different, and not so uncommon, scenario is that a widow is left without heart-felt company and help. Family and friends tend to rush back to their daily duties, often because they are too afraid to talk to the widow who might focus on her pain and memories about the deceased – a tangible reminder that we are all vulnerable and mortal. The feeling of "without-ness" in the widow's life is overwhelming; it is, inevitably, compounded even further by the challenge of often being abandoned by family.

The Hebrew word *alam*, from which the term widow derives, means "to bind," "(become) speechless, mute, silent," and "binding" (*Bible Hub*, "Alam"). These meanings are associated not only with how a woman feels after a significant loss, but also with mourning observances by which the widow may feel constrained. Across times and cultures, women in particular have been restricted by various rituals and norms. "In closed societies," Phyllis Silverman reminds us, "a system of defined rules, customs, and rituals governs all behavior, including mourning" (2004: 62). It is true that customs and rituals offer guidance how to cope with traumatic events and may make the first months of bereavement easier for some widows, but they also limit individual responses to grief that vary in intensity and duration, stifling the self of the widow who may be preoccupied not only with her loss but also with personal well-being. Silverman stresses that an important part of coping with death and readjustment to a new life is realizing that the widowed "cannot always please others and that perhaps they should not even try" (2004: 62). "[S]eeking the approval of others may not be consistent with their needs or the way in which their relationship to themselves is changing," states Silverman (2004: 62), so if one feels like singing to release pent-up emotions, she should be able to do so without

feeling ashamed or guilty. Overwhelmed by grief, Oates cannot understand certain mourning customs that exacerbate her misery. In the days following her husband's death, she is forced to deal with her grieving self as well as with "a disorganized army of delivery men bearing floral displays, crates of fruit, hefty 'sympathy gift baskets' stuffed to bursting with gourmet foods" (Oates 2012: 106). To Oates, these are just perfunctory, even inappropriate, gestures, unable to replace human contact. "Why are people sending me these things?" she ponders, "Do they imagine that grief will be assuaged by chocolate-covered truffles, pâté de foie gras, pepperoni sausages?" (2012: 107). Then she feels remorse as she realizes that she should, in fact, be grateful that so many people want to comfort her (2012: 108). Grief has brought a lot of confusion into Oates's life; now, on top of all the emotional and somatic turmoil, she is forced to cope with conflicting feelings about a custom she is unable to embrace. The situation does not change in the weeks to come, and "the Widow," as Oates refers to herself, has no idea what to do with "all the sympathy cards that accompany the gifts": "Is a widow expected not only to write thank-you notes for presents, but for sympathy cards and letters as well? My heart sinks at the prospect. What a cruel custom! … I will answer them later. When I feel a little stronger. This may not be for a while. Months, years" (2012: 146–147). One may argue that there are more "cruel" customs than piles of "party food" and consolation cards, and there are. Yet, grief is a very individual, culture-, person-, and circumstance-specific process, and so are private mourning rituals. Thus, socially prescribed mourning customs should take into account the needs of an individual bereaved person and be applied in a more thoughtful manner.

From a psychological standpoint, the widow becomes *alam*, as in "mute" or "speechless," during the first hours and days after a loss. Shock, numbness, and disbelief are among the first most common reactions to a loss which may persist longer, depending on an individual situation of the bereaved (Worden 2009: 22, 24). The words "overwhelmed," "shocked," "bewildered," "numb," "speechless" recur in many clinical interviews with the bereaved. These emotional and behavioral sensations contribute to the feeling of being lost and uncertain about who one is. To get out of this muteness that grief often imposes on the bereaved, one needs to talk grief through, either with friends, family, and/or a therapist. While in most cases the latter can be easily arranged, people close to the bereaved may find it difficult to talk to them, surrounding them with additional speechlessness. The talking cure is one of the most effective methods of rebuilding the self after a loss, yet muteness often becomes a companion of the widow by necessity. Even if the widow has things to say, for instance, she wants to share memories about the lost loved one, many families avoid direct conversations about the dead and, by extension, about the situation and feelings of the widow. Reasons vary as to why people close to a widow may avoid meaningful conversations supporting her shaky self; but, as mentioned before, a common thread is the fear of mortality – the widow is an embodiment of sadness and abandonment caused by death. As

her identity and social status suffer along with the loss, the widow seems to have little to offer to others in her grief apart from, quite simply, grief. While this is not the case, and talking to widows can be a very enriching experience preparing us for what is to come and reminding us to cherish what we have, people often grope for words, especially when faced with a bereaved woman (a widower, on the other hand, often finds himself at the center of attention, evoking nurturing instincts in women). Social speechlessness may silence the widow in a variety of ways, which may be why each year there are more and more grief memoirs published, primarily by women. In a chapter appropriately titled "Dead Woman Walking," Oates describes her attempts at socializing two months after her husband's death. Her self-consciousness, combined with the image of the widow in her head, no doubt triggered by the social treatment of widows, prompts her to address the reader:

> If you understand what I am saying, then you understand. If not, not. *You*, who are healthy-minded. *You*, imagining yourself safe on a floating island amid a Sargasso Sea of sorrow. … At so oblique an angle to reason, let alone rationality, the widow speaks a language others can't understand. Like the aptly named black widow spider, the (human) widow is best avoided. (2012: 324–325)

And yet, quite rationally, Oates challenges those who shun the bereaved to step outside their illusory comfort ("safe") zone and break the silence surrounding the figure of the widow.

It should be emphasized that a widow who suffers a significant loss loses her voice metaphorically and literally: as she becomes stripped of a crucial part of her personality (a life companion), she does not know how to define herself and often postpones the attempts to find out who she is, which might result in complicated grief. Friends and family can be of great help, and often are, especially during the first year of bereavement. The widow, however, is frequently silenced by many social and private factors. The journey of the widow from the loss of former self to a new identity depends on specific psychological, somatic, cultural, and temporal circumstances. Finding one's own voice amidst grief and social demands may be a challenge even in the most favorable of circumstances, as exemplified by the struggling widowed self in Oates's story.

POVERTY, INVISIBILITY, SEXUAL ABUSE, SECLUSION, AND EXCLUSION: THE WIDOW ACROSS CULTURES

The creation of a new identity after a loss is challenging, even when one is financially independent and surrounded by loving family and friends. Across the world, there are many cultures which endorse discriminating rules governing women's lives that often violate their basic human rights. In those societies, widows

are particularly stigmatized. In India, Pakistan, East Timor, Nigeria, and many more, largely developing, countries, adjusting to widowhood typically means degradation to a lower social status. Any personal act to assert the self means a fight for survival in a very literal sense of the word. "Across the centuries, across the globe," writes Sally Cline, "we see a history of widows as second-class citizens, caught up in a complex network of sexism, ageism, and a denial of individuality" (1997: 154).

According to the 2001 report of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, while the situation of widows is challenging in many countries worldwide, it is unacceptable in most developing countries. In most cultures, widows far outnumber widowers due to a number of medical, social, and political reasons (e.g. longer life expectancy for women, armed conflicts, multiple sexual partners making men more susceptible to STDs and HIV/AIDS). Consequently, the issues of discrimination, exploitation, and abuse of widows worldwide become more prominent every year (*Women2000* 2001: 3–4).

Southeast Asia is a geographic region "where decades of armed conflict have caused a huge explosion of widowhood for women of all ages" (*Women2000* 2001: 8). For instance, in East Timor, since 1975, one third of the population has been killed or died of famine, leaving behind widowed women in different age groups who were forced to seek refuge in the hills or "moved at gunpoint to camps in West Timor, becoming victims of rape" (*Women2000* 2001: 8). After losing a husband, home, and dignity, many widows in East Timor have been struggling to avoid death from hunger and the enemy forces. Those war widows can hardly speak about an identity change from wife to widow. As with most widows who manage to live in spite of psychological trauma caused by personal loss, widows in countries such as East Timor or Cambodia are survivors, but for these bereaved women, being a survivor is not an outcome of months or years of grieving, or at least not primarily. Their identity evolves from being a survivor of hunger, war, abuse, and uprootedness.

In many African countries, both Francophone and Anglophone, widows, more than other female groups, suffer from a frequent violation of international human rights. Although some of the laws regarding rights to ownership of her deceased husband's property have been executed in recent years, in the past the African widow was subject to multiple acts of discrimination, especially if she was married within the definitions of customary rather than statutory law (*Women2000* 2001: 9). In Nigeria, for example, the belief that "the beauty of a woman is her husband" rendered the widow "as unclean and impure" – she was essentially a health threat to everyone in the household (*Women2000* 2001: 9). If she had no male adult children, she was often ejected from her husband's house, which was immediately inherited by his oldest brother. If the widow with no male children was willing to accept the status of being an additional wife to one of her husband's brothers, she could stay in the house, but it did not protect her from a range of harmful customs that hindered self-healing in the midst of grief (*Women2000* 2001: 9).

According to Nzesylva, a Nigerian writer, blogger, and author of *The Funeral Did Not End* (2012), even today, in many communities, the Nigerian widow is still blamed for her husband's death and must endure degrading rituals to prove her innocence, or satisfy every onlooker that she has paid full respects to her deceased husband:

> Women are forced to shave their hair, be clad in ridiculous looking attires, often times black in colour. They lose their right to freedom and must not be seen outside the house. During her confinement, in some communities she [the widow] is not expected to bathe or change her clothes. She is expected to drink dirty and potentially toxic water used to wash the corpse of her late husband. At the funeral, she is positioned at a corner like some statue. She is not expected to speak more than a few words. She is even shielded from those who come to pay condolence and responds in nods and sighs. We effectively make her dead while she is still alive. (Nzesylva 2012)

The African widow is forced to cope with barbaric customs that divert her attention from healthy grieving. Most psychologists agree that one should work through grief to prevent its complicated form. As described, the mourning Nigerian practices do not seem to ease the pain of grief, and, for the African widow, they do not mark the beginning of adjustment and recovery from grief, but the process of annihilation of her identity.

In India, one of the fastest growing global economies, the situation of a widow is equally bleak. The ritual of sati may be long gone and illegal, but the customs shaping the lives of widows make many of them wish they could actually burn with their husbands. As sociologist Carolyn Custis James notes:

> Vrindavan, one of the Hindus' holiest places in India, is also known as "the City of Widows." Today, on the streets of Vrindavan, widows numbering in the thousands are everywhere. … [W]ith shaven heads and outstretched begging bowls, discarded by their families, living like ascetics in abject poverty, sleeping on the ground, rising to fast and pray for a departed spouse, chanting for hours to earn a bowl of rice. (2011: 63)

Useless rejects – this is how widows in India typically perceive themselves. It is a harsh self-assessment after years of caring for family. Regardless of age, most Indian widows are socially dead, a situation that hardly helps one build a new identity after a loss. According to Sara Barrera and Eva Corbacho, Indian widows become undefined entities, gender-deprived objects: "Widows in India have a pronoun problem. The estimated 40 million women widows in the country go from being called 'she' to 'it' when they lose their husbands. They become 'de-sexed' creatures" (2012). When one becomes an "it," defining the new "I" is impaired linguistically, psychologically, and socially. But many Indian widows may prefer this linguistic invisibility to being referred to as "randi," "prostitute" in Punjabi, a term popular for bereaved women in the northern Indian state of Punjab (Barrera and Corbacho 2012).

Another depersonalizing custom Indian widows are subject to is "uglification": "Whether young or old, widowed women leave behind their colorful saris, part with their jewelry, and even shave their heads, if they are in the more conservative Hindu traditions" (Barrera and Corbacho 2012). Making widows as invisible as possible is to deprive them of feminine attributes so that they do not encourage male sexual desire (Barrera and Corbacho 2012). Sadly, the custom does not protect widowed women from being sexually abused. They lose external attributes of their femininity, for some an important part of who they were, to gain the doubtful privilege of not being maltreated by men, which cannot be formally executed.

Being shunned by society and turned into a sexless, bland "it," which may be repossessed by whomever the family deems fit, may sound like a nightmarish tale to most widows from Western cultures. Terms such as "evil eyes," "a beggar," "a witch," and "a whore" (*Women2000* 2001: 14) contribute to many things but a sound identity is hardly one of them. An even harsher issue is being thrown out of the house by one's own children to whom many Indian widows have devoted their lives. With their primary personality as a mother and wife gone, and without any formal education, their only option is limited to becoming exploited, domestic laborers, or turning to begging and/or prostitution (*Women2000* 2001: 6). "My children threw me out of the house after my husband died," says Manuka Dasi, an Indian widow living in Vrindavan, "I try to earn money by singing devotional songs in temple and manage to get one meal for the day. I am just waiting to die so that I can be out of this life of misery" (Shafi 2016).

"*I don't really have a home*," states Oates, sensing that her direction in life after a loss becomes increasingly thwarted. "*It doesn't matter where I am, I am homeless now*," she adds (2012: 226). Oates's psychological homelessness is what widows in developing countries often experience on a more down-to-earth level. We learn about our own identity through interactions with family, friends, institutions, and other everyday connections. Where we live (nationality, race, ethnicity) and what our living conditions are greatly contribute to our well-being, social status, and abilities to adjust to changing environments and circumstances. Socially and culturally, a widow without a family, home, and job satisfaction has no recognizable identity, apart from one: she is a widow, an individual who may still feel the pain of grief in spite of poverty, invisibility, abuse, seclusion, and exclusion with which her culture feels fit to single her out.

"YET A WIDOW MUST SPEAK": A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

After losing someone dear, most bereaved people experience a range of complex psychological, somatic, behavioral, and cognitive changes. Since the 1970s, a great deal of psychological research has been devoted to widows, more than to any other

group of grieving individuals. One of the reasons for this focused interest may be that women are considered to be more affective grievers (Martin and Doka 2000: 1–5), providing researchers with more detailed information about grief. In Western cultures, widows are more likely to seek therapy than widowers, as going to a therapist is still perceived in some circles as a sign of weakness. Another reason for the psychological and sociological focus on widows is the fact that women tend to live longer than men (Parkes and Prigerson 2010: 16). Even when a man survives his wife, clinicians have observed that the peak of mortality among widowers during the first year of bereavement is higher than in widows (Parkes and Prigerson 2010: 17). Thus, statistically, widows worldwide provide more bereavement-related data than widowers. Given their longevity, widows indeed seem less mortal than widowers, giving rise to such preposterous concepts as that of comparing a widow to a witch. With many unattached women around, widowed men, if so inclined, find it much easier to remarry – a factor that also puts the widow in a less favorable light in most cultures (cf. Silverman 2004: 4). Widows, newly single women, become a potential threat to married women and, sometimes, single men. After Iris Murdoch's death, John Bayley found himself at the center of female attention to the point that he was frightened of one of them as she was so persistent in her role as caregiver (Bayley 2003: 448).

In the light of the above data, it seems natural that the figure of the widow also predominates in grief memoirs. Even if their economic and living circumstances are not as dire as those of widows in India or Nigeria, Western widows often share with them the experience of a lower social status, financial problems, and unequal social treatment that make them self-conscious and do not contribute to the recovery of the grieving self. Via bereavement narratives, widows in Western cultures are taking a stand and sending a message that the widow is a part of every culture as are many other bereaved people.

From all the grief memoirs I have examined, Oates's comes across as the most self-involved and self-pitying. She strikes one as a mixture of Freud's mourner and melancholic, because, after the loss, she suffers not only from acute loneliness and identity disruption, but also from clinical depression accompanied by self-reproach coupled with suicidal thoughts. And yet, amid her pain and confusion, she manages to expose the harshness of life after a loss and pushes the reader to consider multiple definitions of what it means to her to be a widow. She pronounces her new self in the title of her narrative, *A Widow's Story: A Memoir*, incorporating this rather undesirable identity into the matrix of culturally endorsed stories and identities. As Oates reflects on her situation, she comes to the conclusion that the widow in society is actually non-existent because she has no distinct voice: "the widow speaks a language others can't understand" (2012: 325). Consequently, Oates makes it her aim to let the widow be heard.

There are three issues that stand out in Oates's narrative: 1) a pervading sense of aloneness, emptiness, and alienation; 2) the acute realization of mortality; and

3) awkward interactions of the widow with others. These issues have already been partially addressed at various points in this discussion, but additional select examples from Oates's account of widowhood deserve a closer look.

In her attempts to define who a widow is, Oates stresses the general denial people exhibit in the face of mortality. As long as death does not interfere with our life directly or through the death of someone else, our identity remains intact, or so we think. After her husband is hospitalized with what was initially diagnosed as pneumonia, but turned out to be an E. coli lung infection, Oates keeps vigil at his hospital bed. Exhausted, she dozes off and dreams of some "primitive bacterial forms" (2012: 30–31). She wakes up with an odd sensation that she might have been infected as well. In recollecting this memory, Oates states:

> *Something of the derangement of Widowhood is beginning here. For in dreams our future selves are being prepared. In denial that her husband is seriously ill the Widow-to-Be will not, when she returns home that evening, research E. coli on the Internet. Not for nearly eighteen months after her husband's death will she look up this common bacterial strain to discover the blunt statement she'd instinctively feared at the time and could not have risked discovering:* pneumonia due to *Escherichia coli* has a reported mortality rate of up to 70 percent. (2012: 31)

The most poignant moments in Oates's memoir are those when she expresses her longing for her husband combined with a sudden realization of how impermanent everything is. "In the days immediately following Ray's death," Oates remembers, "I felt like inert matter bombarded by radioactive waves – every minute an acute, profound realization – heart-stopping revelations! … *So this is what life is! Life is – bounded by death! People die! We will all die! We will all suffer, and we will all … die*" (242). To some, Oates may sound like a manic prophet, not an unusual image of a grieving woman in patriarchal cultures. While not all women are classic affective grievers, and not all men are instrumental grievers (Martin and Doka 2000), Oates confirms the social bias presenting the widow as an emotional individual. Yet, hers is a constructive portrayal: the widow is wrecked not only by grief but also by an acute realization that her loss will be compounded by other losses, including her own identity and, in the future, her physical self. These reflections classify as legitimate reasons for a less stoic state of mind. The widow, in other words, embodies what all people will become some day: a mortal who suffers after the loss of a mortal. "To the widow, all wives are widows-to-be," Oates sums up, "Ours is the basilisk stare you will want to avoid" (2012: 240).

Oates's deepening emptiness and loneliness caused by Ray's death make her aware of her alien social status, and her alienation and self-alienation power her emptiness and loneliness. She exchanges e-mails with friends, meets some of them from time to time, but most of her endeavors to socialize result in a strengthened sense of being different and painfully lonely. Only a widow, in her mind, can feel

the pain she does and no amount of empathy from her friends sets the widow on the course to feeling socially accepted:

> Most days – most hours – the widow dwells in a netherworld of *not-here and not-there*. … For the widow is a posthumous person passing among the living. When the widow smiles, when the widow laughs, you see the glisten in the widow's eyes, utter madness, an actress desperate to play her role as others would wish her to play her role and only another widow, another woman who has recently lost her husband, can perceive the fraud. (2012: 332)

Oates's subjective reflections upon the image of the widow find their confirmation in several social gatherings and her attempts to execute such gatherings. Oates's close friends look out for her, which she takes comfort in, yet some of her colleagues at the university fail to keep the widow's social self alive, promising "phantom" dinners that never materialize (Oates 2012: 180–181).

In a chapter titled "Cruel Crude Stupid 'Well-Intentioned'," Oates describes an unfortunate dinner during which some of her and Ray's "oldest Princeton friends" raise their glasses in a toast to marriage and "their conversation turns upon old times … in their marriages" (2012: 286). "I am miserable with longing to be away from these people," Oates concludes, "away from their unwittingly cruel talk that so excludes me …. *How can they not know how they are hurting me?*" (2012: 286). She leaves abruptly, crying and escaping one of the men who follows her to apologize (Oates 2012: 286). Such reminiscences would probably hurt most bereaved people who suffered a significant loss. The widow, while not alone in her inability to adjust to her single status, seems to suffer in a particularly acute manner. She is unattached and lonely. It is significant that none of the women in that restaurant run after the writer to enquire what happened.

Much as Oates tries to assemble a new self, "the Widow" (Oates frequently speaks about herself in the third person) overshadows all other identities. One of the saddest social interactions takes place a couple of hours after her husband's death. Oates rushes to the hospital and, after spending some time with her husband, she is told by the hospital staff to gather and take away her husband's belongings before she leaves:

> It is my task – my first task as a widow – to clear the hospital room of my husband's things. Not yet have I realized – this will take time – that as a widow I will be reduced to a world of things. And these things retain but the faintest glimmer of their original identity and meaning as in a dead and desiccated husk of something once organic there might be discerned a glimmer of its original identity and meaning. (2012: 63)

Many widows take comfort in tasks and rituals that follow a death. Many keep up a task-oriented lifestyle months and years after a death in an effort not to think about the enormity of their losses, an approach that is recommended in the early stages of bereavement, but, in the long run, may be detrimental to one's well-being as

the reality of a loss may resurface unexpectedly and lead to complex reactions and health issues. "The Widow," Oates says about her persona, "takes comfort in such small tasks, rituals; the perimeters of the Death-protocol in which experienced others will guide her as one might guide a stunned and doomed animal out of a pen and into a chute by the use of a ten-foot pole" (2012: 63). But it also bothers her that along with the primary loss, everything else seems to have lost meaning as well. The hospital procedures, devoid of human warmth and empathy, do not ease the emerging feeling of desolation that the Widow experiences. The indifferent hospital staff are a harbinger of how various institutions and acquaintances will react to the widow and her loss, and Oates signals this aspect of widowhood several times in her memoir. Being handled instrumentally contributes to the diminishment of identity that the widow faces after a loss.

Although the overall image of the widow in Oates's grief account is not very uplifting, it is constructive and culturally important. By revisiting her loss in writing, she attempts to restore additional meaning in the Widow's life. The progress is slow and there are many setbacks. Oates confirms that socializing, even if ridden with failures, and addressing taboos, such as making others aware of their mortality, are all ways to rebuild the widow's identity. The most crucial method to adjust to a new life, however, seems to be the task of writing about her grief experiences. A couple of days after her husband's death, Oates writes to her friend, author Edmund White: "*The days are not too bad, it's the nights and the empty house that fill me with panic*. … *But just typing this letter is satisfying somehow. We are addicted to language for its sanity-providing*" (2012: 115). Oates draws attention here to a democratic medium that has helped many people, not only professional writers, to face traumas by slowing down cognitive processes and allowing one to look at one's problems from the outside. The healing power of writing has been extensively studied by psychologists since James Pennebaker's famous systematic research. In *Opening up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, Pennebaker admits that his inspiration to study how writing improves mental and physical health had its roots as much in his own attempts to write self-reflectively as in the literary concept of catharsis: "Individuals have been known to produce major literary works while under great conflict. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, … and many other masterpieces express the fundamental psychological fears and traumas of the authors" (Pennebaker [1990] 1997: 98–99). Oates's *A Widow's Story* is a self-healing account, but it does much more than that: it makes the reader aware of the challenges that the widow, even in developed countries, faces daily and of how the image of the widow can be restored, along with her identity, by a more open social approach. On the last page of her memoir, in a section aptly titled "The Widow's Handbook," Oates restates her message: "Of the widow's countless death-duties there is really just one that matters: on the first anniversary of her husband's death the widow should think *I kept myself alive*" (416). What ultimately matters to the widow, and what should

matter to all of us, are not mourning restrictions and demands, but the fact that she is a living self, a temporarily lost identity, that, nevertheless, wants to live in spite of all the associations she may evoke in the rest of us.

CONCLUSIONS

In her 1977 essay "Women in widowhood," Carol Barrett points out, "Most widows hate the word 'widow.' Many have told me that people respond to them as if they have an infectious disease" (1977: 856). The situation has not improved much today. When one of her friends keeps rescheduling a dinner invitation, Oates realizes that, in fact, her friend and her husband are dreading to see her. "C_ is erecting obstacles to our dinner as in an equestrian trial in which each jump must be higher than its predecessor, and more dangerous," comments Oates. "I envision a thirty-foot dining room table and at the farther end the widow placed like a leper, as far from the lovely C_ as possible," she adds (2012: 181). World organizations, human rights activists, journalists, writers, and many other individuals draw attention to the position and treatment of widows across societies. The image of the widow has been gradually changing in Western cultures (see e.g. Silverman's *Widow to Widow*), but the progress is slow, and it is even slower, or non-existent, in many developing countries.

Although this analysis only scratches the surface of the problem, it aims to draw attention to the self of the widow which, in the aftermath of losing a beloved spouse, disintegrates to a large extent and suffers from many more adversities than grief alone. Such a self needs all the help she can get. For those of us who have not suffered such a loss in life, it might be hard to fathom how easily one's identity might be lost due to grief and how difficult it is to adjust to a life without the loved one. All of us, however, will lose someone in our lives and our identities will be questioned during the grief process. "It's good for the widow to be told that there are other widows in the world. Plenty of other widows," Oates reflects (2012: 110). If there is a universal lesson to be learnt from the stories of widows presented in this analysis, it is that there are plenty of bereaved people in the world who are forced to face multiple adversities, often life-threatening, along with the suffering of grief. All of them, regardless of their gender, deserve widely-understood social support in their pain.

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