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# Symbolic Games in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* by Joyce Carol Oates

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This article will show that postmodern thoughts play an essential role in Joyce Carol Oates' *Wonderland Quartet*. In its opening novel *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, I will also consider the imagery of Lewis Carroll's Alice texts that influenced Oates' *Quartet*. Oates' and Carroll's texts share the depiction of decentralised permissiveness and rejection of all authority that I interpret through the aesthetic conception of postmodern games by Gilles Deleuze. By blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, the aspect of violence is repressed in Carroll's texts. However, Oates aestheticises violence to maximise the diverse impact of postmodern sentiment on American cultural forms that emerged in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to Carroll's Alice, who demands order to protect herself from the chaos, Clara in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* rejects conventions and fabricates chaos to alleviate her unprivileged condition.

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The novel *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) is the opening volume in Joyce Carol Oates' Wonderland Quartet and the second novel of her prolific career. Following the aftermath of the Great Depression in the 1930s, the core action of the plot stretches into the post-war boom of the fifties. In her text, the narrative voice is detached from the voices of the protagonists to portray a vivid characterisation of her underprivileged protagonists. In *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, the themes of power games between sexes are elaborated upon by the protagonist's fictional gamification leading to a breakthrough.

I will closely examine *A Garden of Earthly Delights* through the reading of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), whose critical account have been frequently referenced in deciphering the concepts of post-structuralist and postmodern thought worldwide. Particularly in *The Logic of Sense* (1969) that followed his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), Deleuze (1969: 62) elaborated on the post-modern concept of chance in what he called “an ideal game”. In this text, Deleuze examined the logic in the Alice texts by Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). Deleuze meant by the ideal game the postmodern solution of the philosophical conflict of the death of God that was proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *The Gay Science* (1882). In this context, Deleuze referred to a psychological process of affirming fortuitous thoughts in replacement for cognitive reasoning to establish personal autonomy in the void after the loss of the foundation of the external authority of God. To define an ideal game, Deleuze (1969: 62, emphasis added) advocates for “new principles” which need to be “imagined” to replace the conventional moral order.

The reading of Deleuze becomes relevant when re-reading Oates' novel in the context of 2021, the decade of rising demands for public affirmations of decentralised positions. I present my interpretative claim to elucidate the development of the aspirational protagonist Clara Walpole. In the first section, I will shed more light on the card imagery of Oates that the author employs to depict a fictional power game of Clara while drawing on the imagery of Lewis Carroll's Alice texts *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that became the inspiration for Oates' Wonderland Quartet. In her written correspondence from 2019, the author explains her motivation for naming of the entire quartet after Carroll's imaginary world. Oates (2019) says:

The title “Wonderland Quartet” was added after the original publication, by me. My motivation in adding further novels has been to explore the roots of America through the post-modernist “gothic” sensibility”.

Deleuze (1969: 62) employs Carroll's surreal images to demonstrate playful navigation through the chaos in his “ideal game”. Therefore, I will start by explaining the concept of games by Deleuze in Carroll's Alice text, and in the following sections of my article, I will examine Oates' depiction of detachment and transformation into the aesthetic existence of Clara.

### Deleuze's Ideal Game

I will set my argument in motion and explain the link between Carroll's and Oates' texts by quoting a passage from Deleuze (1969: 62) on what he calls “the ideal game”:

Such a game—without rules, with neither winner nor loser, without responsibility, a game of innocence, a caucus-race, in which skill and chance are no longer distinguishable—seems to have no reality.

What is meant by the game is the postmodern solution of the philosophical conflict of the death of God, which refers to the

principle of autonomous identity. Carroll's work evokes a game through the dream vision of Alice, along with the nonsense rules of strange creatures in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. However, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, it is Alice alone who enters the chess game. Both Gillian Beer (2016: 63–64) and Deleuze (1969: 61) ponder the game aspect of Carroll's texts, and while their theories reach a linear cohesion, it is Deleuze who calls Carroll's game “ideal”.

Deleuze (1969: 61) juxtaposes ideal games to normal games that follow “preexisting categorical rules”. To outline the difference between ideal and normal games, I will clarify the terminology I employ in this discussion. First, I use the word *game* as a noun and *play* as a verb, i.e. the activity that is associated with games. Playing a game means an active involvement in the game, opposed to a passive state when the subject is, deliberately or unconsciously, excluded from the participation. Second, I employ the term ‘game’ in two semantic aspects according to Deleuze's terminology. The first is the literal meaning of games that possess pre-existing rules, and which are therefore called *normal* by Deleuze. The second aspect is the new concept of the game that, according to Deleuze, implies the fictional vision of life pursuits and desires that are played in the invented life game, and are called *ideal* games. It is important to note that, according to Deleuze, the fictional world of invented life games is the only realm through which humans navigate, and so it is essential to play the ideal game.

Before explaining the concept of the ideal game, I will specify the meaning and function of normal games. According to Deleuze (1969: 61), normal games have four basic characteristics: (1) pre-existing rules that possess categorical value, (2) the distributing hypothesis of loss and gain, which divide chance accordingly, (3) organisation of a numerically distinct distribution, and (4) the result of either victory or defeat. Further, he (Deleuze, 1969: 61) asserts that normal games are partial because they characterise only a part of human activity, since they “retain chance only at certain points” due to the causality of chances. Additionally, Deleuze (1969: 61) divides normal games into “games of skill” and “games of chance”. These are defined by the same four features named above, and are only distinguished by the specific nature of their rules. It is possible to mix rules, and Deleuze (1969: 61–62) defines the state with mixed rules as follows:

[Mixed rules in a game] refer to another type of activity, labour, or morality, whose caricature or counterpart they are, and whose elements they integrate in a new order. Whether it be Pascal's gambling man or Leibniz's chess-playing God, the game is explicitly taken as a model only because it has implicit models which are not games.

Therefore, Deleuze distinguishes major and minor games, and they remain in the category of normal games. However, to define an ideal game, Deleuze (1969: 62, emphasis added) regards the necessity of “new principles” that need to be “imagined”. According to Deleuze, after the death of God, it is not the partiality and pre-existing order but the affirmation of chance in its complexity that constitutes an ideal game of human autonomy. In accordance with the affirmation of the plurality of chaos through playing games and the invocation of symbolic fictions of ourselves, Deleuze (1969: 63) says that only in thought is it possible to affirm all chance. Deleuze (1969: 63, emphasis original) says:

In it [ideal game] there is nothing but victories for those who know how to play, that is how to affirm and ramify chance, instead of dividing it *in order to dominate it, in order to wager, in order to win.*

Ideal games unlock the space for fictional singularities and are not determined by the dialectics of a good and bad character, since when fiction is played out in-game form, all is permitted.

Neither Carroll's animal characters nor Oates' human protagonist Clara conforms to the existing rules of conventional culture, instead preferring to invent new rules. Carroll uses the game metaphor and, according to Deleuze (1969: 61), the intention is to transform the rules of existing games, invent new games, and invoke an ideal game.

Oates (2001/2002: 159) says about Carroll's texts:

Underlying Alice's adventures is a strategy of improvisation, an animistic sense of fluidity, flux, constant metamorphosis: amusing at times and at other times highly disturbing.

The creatures in Carroll's Wonderland invent new rules as they go, to suit their situations. For instance, (Carroll, 1865: 94) the Duchess realises that pepper makes people hot-tempered, and she is "very much pleased at having found out a new kind of rule". Alice (Carroll, 1865: 125) responds cautiously; however, identifying a new rule that is invented to manipulate her when she is to be sent away from the royal court because of her size:

At this moment the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his notebook, called out "Silence!", and read out from his book, "Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.*"

Everybody looked at Alice.

"I'm not a mile high," said Alice.

"You are," said the King.

"Nearly two miles high," added the Queen.

"Well, I sha'n't go, at any rate," said Alice:

"Besides, that's not a regular rule: you invented it just now."

"It's is the oldest rule in the book," said the King.

"Then it ought to be Number One," said Alice.

In addition to Alice's opposition towards royal authority, Juliet Dusinberre (1987: 73) asserts that Carroll's protagonist refuses to see the world "in terms dictated by the Duchess, Humpty Dumpty, the Mad Hatter, the Walrus or even the Carpenter". Beer (2016: 25) defines her reading of Carroll's text as to "resist seeking a moral progress" of the heroine. Oates (2001/2002: 159) says that Carroll's texts depict "the enduring charm of the story precisely in its being contained by a child's deeply moral consciousness". In Carroll's text, Alice seeks a safe categorisation but encounters nonsense rules designed to strengthen the dominant position of the authority figures who constantly redefine them. Alice recognises the trap of these rules and therefore repudiates them. The effect of unreliable rules in Carroll's Wonderland symbolises the reluctance towards conventional values that were fostered by the Victorian middle-class, its educational system, and the church.

The power relationships in Victorian society are mirrored in the relationship between a child and authoritative fictional characters in Carroll's Wonderland. The section "The Mock Turtle's Story" in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* begins with the conversation between Alice and the Duchess, the latter of whom is obsessed with morals that constitute rules. However, her morals are caught up in wordplay, where the literal and figurative meaning has to be discerned. For instance, (Carroll, 1865: 96) the Duchess says, "birds of a feather flock together", referring to a flamingo and mustard, or "the more there is of mine, the less

there is of yours", which refers to a "large mustard-mine". When discussing a vegetable that does not look like one, the Duchess (Carroll, 1865: 96) says:

And the moral of that is—'Be what you would seem to be'—or, if you'd like it put more simply — 'Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than that you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise'.

In this passage, Carroll hints at the identity theme that constantly occurs with the transformation trope in both of his texts. But instead of clear moral instruction, the message is rather confusing. Located in a place that is stripped of order and foundation, Alice is struggling with her identity. Her memory of what she was in the previous setting fails, and her present recognition is a process that unfolds as the plot develops. She (Carroll, 1865: 22) asks herself, "who in the world am I?" The transformation of her size and hostile reactions of Wonderland creatures add to Alice's confusion. Deleuze (1969: 63) argues that "this game is reserved then for thought and art". In this sense, Carroll retains Alice's playfulness in a fantastical setting, and so it is restricted to imaginary thoughts and art. However, Oates experiments with the externalisation of the symbolic games and sets fictional singularities of her characters in conventional life.

In her *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, the author tests the permissive context of cultural articulations on the search for liberating selfhood of Clara Walpole who experiences a crisis of identity. In the context of Oates' text, Clara decides on the creation of her new singularity by fictionalising. Oates aestheticises the philosophical conflict of moral consciousness that is juxtaposed with the aesthetic existence, imprinting it on the characters of Clara and Swan, and I will explore their distinctive developments. In contrast to Alice, who demands order and logic in a chaotic dream setting, Clara in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* rejects conventions and fabricates chaos to alleviate her unprivileged condition.

The entire first section of Oates' novel depicts violence, manifested as harsh language and images of domestic abuse. Reduced to societal margins, Clara, the child of a migrant worker, is born in the opening scene. In her migrant camp, the hostility of Carleton Walpole, Clara's father, towards his wife Pearl increases with the arrival of each new child. After Pearl's death during childbirth, overburdened Clara learns to fictionalise her new identity to escape the embarrassing stigmatisation of her underprivileged upbringing. Still underage, she playfully attracts men in a bar and consequently escapes from her violent father with Lowry, a stranger she meets and who helps her to settle down.

After Lowry announces his departure to Mexico, heartbroken Clara hides her pregnancy from Lowry. When Lowry returns and declares his love for Clara, she fictionalises her advantageous marriage to Curt Revere. She pretends that Revere is the father of her son Swan, known as Steven to Revere, and so Lowry leaves for good. However, Swan challenges her aspirations and aims to organise the chaos of his life, but only gains control through violence. He kills Revere, then himself and ultimately outplayed Clara isolates herself in a nursing home.

In relation to Oates' intensive study of philosophy, Harold Bloom (1987: 1, 6) comments on Oates' moral self-contradiction, noting her fictional urge to accept limitations and contrasting it with her suggestion to worship a life-force. Oates' writing engages with the underlying moral concept, which Oates' characters return to or are confronted by at different stages of their development. Regarding her as a former Catholic, for Greg Johnson (1998: 41), it is the Christian practices that "provided [Oates] a system of belief against which to measure and develop her own

philosophical views". *A Garden of Earthly Delights* suggests a system of moral judgements in line with Christian spirituality, which posit a reason for alternative philosophical theories and societal experiments.

**Card Games in *A Garden of Earthly Delights*.** Oates depicts blurred lines between fiction and reality where sense is extended by nonsense. In her text, Oates recalls Carroll's Wonderland dream setting imagery and the element of absurdity and chaos. Relating to Carroll's Alice, card games are commonly played in Clara's camp, proposing a literal meaning of games with the pre-existing categorised rules. However, Clara's interest in card games is mentioned only in reference to card images. At one stage, she (Oates, 2006: 206) remembers the image of men playing cards in the camp, "while in another cabin, Clara's mother [Pearl] was bleeding to death" during childbirth. In this image, the author contrasts the card game and its fixed rules with the life game metaphor. While playing with cards, the men calculate their chance of winning, whereas, within the complexity of life, Clara's mother loses her chance to live and dies. The author depicts the gender stereotypes that characterised the 1950s on the character of Pearl, who passively accepts her vulnerable position of an impregnated female on societal margins with no voice. Witnessing the damaging effect of her mother's inferior position in a camp, Clara conditions her survival and self-improvement upon her victory over men, her game between sexes representing an inevitable form of escapism in the text.

Elaborating on the figurative meaning of a fictional game between the sexes, the author depicts children who interact at school. Playful teasing of the schoolboys to win the attention of the girls symbolises a game for Clara (Oates, 2006: 45). Confronting the passivity of her mother, Clara actively invents a *card* life game in which she plays against men and aims to win. Clara decisively fashions a seductive female role as a form of pretence. After visiting the Methodist church, puzzled she leaves for the bar where she sees Lowry for the first time and immediately likens him to a playing card (Oates, 2006: 102):

You were supposed to value the king the highest but Clara had an eye for the jack. Jack of spades was her favourite. The blond man {Lowry} had a look of the jack of spades, Clara thought.

Alluding to Lewis Carroll's (1865: 129) imagery of card game figures, the scene is reminiscent of Alice's final dismissal of the Queen, who threatens her life: "You are all a pack of cards! Who cares for you?". In Oates' (2006: 101) text, it is Clara's male partners who are decoded by the card game images and it is Clara who determines the value of her companion in her game. Thus, she fictionalises her own rules to the game that she enters. When asked about her age by the barman, she replies, "How old do you need to be?" With a playful attitude, she invents what suits her. She pretends to be older than she is because Lowry calls her a child, nevertheless, drives Clara away from her father the next day.

At the age of 17, Clara gives birth to a baby boy after Lowry leaves. In her existential game with Lowry, Clara's risk of losing him permanently increases, and so she generates a new strategy and alters the rules. A new rule translates as the replacement of the opponent in Clara's game. Clara's instrumental game recalls the chaotic setting in Carroll's Wonderland, where new rules are constantly invented to satisfy the characters' fictional development and affirm her existence. In Oates' text, it is Clara's next pursuit of Revere, who provides a farmhouse for her. Though Revere (Oates, 2006: 201) says that "the land's no good", it pleases

Clara. She (Oates, 2006: 194) does not accept the conventional perspective of the land but generates her own:

The slightly shabby farm with its tilted and moss-specked barns, the wild grass that to Clara was so beautiful, the wildflowers and weeds and bushes sprung out of other bushes like magic.

The author employs the visualisation of a disorganised garden of Clara in the text. Instead of cultivating systematic arrangements of flowers, Clara prefers to leave it to grow wild. Her perspective of an unkempt garden corresponds to the postmodern affirmation of chaos. Recalling Carroll's element of magic in his fictional universe, where animals talk and dream substitutes reality, it is also "magic" that attracts Clara (Oates, 2006: 194) in her garden. It is also her autonomous perception that assigns meaning to things or people. By swapping Lowry for Revere, Clara exchanges the jack of spades for the king. She (Oates, 2006: 189) thinks:

If Curt Revere was a playing card, Clara thought, he was one of the kings. Heavy-jawed, inclined to brooding. Not fast and sexy-treacherous like the jacks. You were supposed to think that the king of spades was stronger than the jack of spades, but that wasn't so.

Clara thus considers the value of the men by comparing them with playing cards, but in a way that opposes traditional game rules. The rules that Clara invents resemble traditional card games; however, she changes the pre-existing values of the cards, and she determines new card values on the level of emotional engagement with the opponent. In her game, it is safer to play with Revere whose traditionally highest power rank of a king implies an increased risk for his opponent.

For Clara, however, it signifies a more relaxed game that leads her to a secure victory. It is Revere who is in love with her, and therefore, his emotional involvement significantly decreases his power while the absence of Clara's affection increases her power. Conversely, to play with an opponent who has a lower rank in normal card games, such as a jack, would be a more accessible contestant. Lowry being a jack in her game, this, however, becomes a highly risk-taking move because the power of Clara decreases due to her love for Lowry. By deep emotional involvement, Clara is not able to detach herself and flex her perspective. Thus, her position weakens in her game.

To win with Revere, she (Oates, 2006: 276) displays happiness to please him. She creates a fictional narrative that Swan is Revere's most beloved son, a situation that makes Swan feel awkward, despite Clara (Oates, 2006: 276) being "playful, laughing. Making a game of it". Her playfulness (Oates, 2006: 280) permeates her life while performing mundane tasks such as cooking and serving food: "She made a playful ceremony of it, placing strips of bacon and tiny sausages on napkins to soak up the excess grease". Thus, Clara fictionalises her new identity in the power game she willingly enters.

With the previous announcement of Lowry to leave for Mexico, Clara experiences a crisis of personal identity. In Carroll's text, the changing physical proportions of Alice indicate her identity transformations. Recalling Carroll's shrunk image of Alice that symbolises her low point of confusion and fear, Clara (Oates, 2006: 194), lying in bed next to Lowry before he leaves, "retreated from him, grown small. She felt small [...] She had shrunken far inside her body and could not control its trembling". The image of size reduction implies the diminishing control of Clara in her game. Consequently, she (Oates, 2006: 195) internalises self-hatred, "She cried, and cursed herself for her weakness!"

However, after two weeks of “the [passive] dreaminess”, she (Oates, 2006: 195) regains her power by changing her perspective on Lowry. She (Oates, 2006: 196) re-valuates her opinion, and thinks that, “he [Lowry] did love her, in his way. She would always believe this”. Initially angry with him, now Clara accepts his abandonment and declares her new position of security.

Like Carroll’s Alice, Clara changes the perspective on the course of her game and contrives new rules in the existing chaos that is caused by the absence of Lowry. After meeting Revere, Clara (Oates, 2006: 206) initiates their roles:

They acted out two roles, not quite consciously: Revere was the guilty one, because he believed he had made her pregnant, and Clara was the victimized one, made softer and gentler by being victimized.

It is a game of pretence that Clara invents to achieve her aspirations. In regular card games, the rules are fixed and it is important to remember them in order to maximise the chance of victory. When Revere visits her with his cousin Judd, they teach her regular card games that she (Oates, 2006: 212) never wins:

Clara made mistakes because she could never remember the rules. [...] Staring at a hand of cards newly dealt to her, trying to make sense of the numbers and suits, Clara understood that her brain could go so far and no further.

In her forgetfulness, Clara resembles Alice (Carroll, 1865: 23), who fails to remember the multiplication table she had learned in school. Clara is described as being an intelligent member of the Walpole family, yet her early departure from the educational system results in limited literacy and numeracy skills. Failing her higher cognitive skills, Clara is depicted as unable to follow the logic of the game. Therefore, it is pleasing to Clara that in her invented game she does not need to follow any pre-existing rules of social convention, but rather is free to invent her own. In her fictional game, Clara improves her social status by marrying Revere and moving into the mansion immediately after the death of Revere’s wife and consequent manipulating Revere’s sons into leaving.

In contrast to Clara, Swan relies on conventional ethics and feels responsible for her punishment. In the context of games, Swan prefers an alternative view on life. He (Oates, 2006: 267, emphasis added) thinks, “Living was a game with *rules* he had to *learn* for himself by watching these adults as carefully as possible”. Swan perceives living a fictionalised vision of his mother to be illogical, unable to express his state verbally. He (Oates, 2006: 277) merely utters, “no words, no logic”. Unlike Clara, it is Swan (Oates, 2006: 349) who demands logic, preferring sense to nonsense: “All I want, he thought, is to get things straight. Put things in order”. Swan epitomises Western morality and is unable to grasp an autonomous perspective which merely feeds his judgements.

Ultimately, Swan attempts to release himself from his mother by taking desperate measures. Internally stored anger is directed at Clara; however, at the last minute, instead of killing her, Swan murders Revere and afterwards commits suicide. In this way, Clara’s passive aggressivity is externalised by her beloved offspring, which turns into a means of her destruction. In this text, Oates juxtaposes her binary depiction of creative life affirmation and its life-denying destruction.

**Detachment and Aesthetic Existence.** Clara is depicted as a flexible individual that adapts easily to new predicaments and settings. She is raised in an atmosphere of the constant motion of migrant work that supports the sense of detachment. She is not accustomed to stable relationships where affection and

compromise are generally nurtured. After leaving her family, in a relationship with Revere, she isolates herself from the Tintern community because it labels her a mistress.

During the conservative period after the Great Depression, Clara experiences hostility from the community. People reject her and children throw mud on her new car. Her new house provides her only shelter, a safe space where she (Oates, 2006: 227, emphasis original) feels, “herself *sinking down to a depth* that was quite unconscious but where all feelings, emotions of love and hate, blended together in a single energy”. She also separates from the perspectives of others and meets the depths of her inner self. Clara (Oates, 2006: 228) wonders:

At the power of her body and at the deep vast depths of herself where there were no names or faces or memories but only desires that had no patience with the slow motion of daily life.

According to Deleuze, a new psychological entity, a potential self-invention arises only after facing inner depths where the human energy transforms. Deleuze (1969: 273) equals simulacrum to a singularity that has the “power to affirm divergence”. By the term ‘singularity’, Deleuze (1969: 109) means “impersonal and pre-individual” unbound energy. Deleuze (1969: 109) argues that:

It is a Dionysian sense-producing machine, in which nonsense and sense are no longer found in simple opposition, but rather co-present to one another within a new discourse.

According to this formula, the boundaries between sense and nonsense blur, yet each singularity becomes valid. According to Deleuze, there is no longer an old or a new identity, but the two become one and only.

In *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Oates uses fire metaphor that symbolises identity transformation. When Revere introduces the area they are passing through to Clara and Swan, the latter is curious about smokestacks being set on fire. Revere (Oates, 2006: 284-285) explains that, “The smokestacks are not on fire. [...] It’s self-consuming – the smokestacks won’t burn”. In a similar manner, such smokestacks transform the material into ashes symbolising the human transformation of psychological processes. The main function of the smokestacks is to burn items repeatedly, as people are able to actively turn their irrational passion into creative forces to establish their new identity. As smokestacks are designed to endure in high temperatures, so people are able to dominate their challenges. In line with Deleuze’s theory (1969: 109), this is what is required for an improved identity to emerge - a new psychic version of the same physical body.

In the second part of the text, Clara self-invents herself. She chooses fiction to affirm her simulacrum. Apart from Clara’s physical isolation, she detaches herself from her personal history and learns to ignore her past. The American critic Elle G. Friedman (1980: 37) proposes that Oates “depicts this denial of the past through her characters’ denial of the names with which they were born”. Also according to Friedman (1980: 37), names indicate the fate of the character and a name change implies fate reversal in Oates’ texts. Clara refuses to use and subsequently renounces her surname because it indicates her roots. Instead, she (Oates, 2006: 209) introduces herself as “Just Clara. I don’t have any last name”. Therefore, Swan learns his surname only by accident. Gambling on marriage with Revere, Clara gains his surname for herself and Swan, and thus affirms her re-invention.

Finally freeing herself from the humiliation of migrant camps, the meaning of her new surname evokes respect and admiration. The surname resembles the historical figure Paul Revere, and the symbolic nature of Clara’s new identity is based on the historic

rebellion that led to the United States' Declaration of Independence from Great Britain in 1776. Thus, the same surname symbolically defines Clara's new simulacrum that is affirmed by her disagreement with the nationally recognised moral conventions. Additionally, Swan's first name is changed from Steven to Swan as Clara considers the latter to be a stronger name. The image of a swan is connected with water and thus implies fluidity, creative life pursuits, and harmony. However, Swan does not like this name, and immediately before committing his final act of violence he (Oates, 2006: 391) emphasises the extent of his dislike: "I said, don't call me that! I can't stand it!" Swan feels trapped between his two names which denote his two identities. He (Oates, 2006: 374) cannot bear the "moral repugnance" with which he is filled, and is disturbed by his transformation to resemble Clara:

He would fight it. He knew how. He'd isolated it – this sensation, as of imminent helplessness – as the way in which a fetus grows in its mother's belly: tiny head taking form, tiny arms, legs, torso, fish-body becoming human; sucking its energy from the encasing flesh and growing. Mysteriously growing. If he knew where this demonic energy came from, he would know the secret to all things.

Oates' (2006: 374) language "fish-body becoming human" evokes the hybrid image in the process of physical transformation. The author lists the growing body parts that represent the shaping of a character that concern Swan. Swan feels that, unwillingly, his life takes the mental form of his mother and experiences a crisis of identity. In the Afterword of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Oates (2006: 402) says that Swan's "life of the imagination [...] is finally repudiated". Unable to shift his perspective, the frustration of Swan leads to self-destructive resentment and the final nihilist act of physical murder.

Swan's moral consciousness disapproves Clara's unconventional individuality and contradicts her rejection of social conventions. In her narrative, Oates celebrates individual pursuits in American society by transforming the moral consciousness of Clara into her aesthetic existence. By aestheticising the egotistic pursuit of Clara, the author reflects on the authentic cultural forms that formed after 1950 in the United States of America. Oates depicts a formally uneducated population experimenting with postmodern thoughts to alleviate their harsh conditions and questions the emerging cultural forms of self-improvement that bear destructive consequences.

In *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, the narrator (Oates, 2006: 331) says, "The last thing you wanted to feel for Clara Walpole was sorry". Swan also challenges a sympathetic reading of Clara. There is no emotional colouring of Swan involved, and by the last part of the text, their relationship appears to have become merely formal. Swan (Oates, 2006: 338, emphasis original) perceives his mother negatively: "I hate you. You are a bitch. He would have liked to punish her, and that name was a punishment". Swan's desire to punish Clara is consequently manifested in the text by his physical act of aggression. Prior to that, seeking help from Dr Piggott, Swan (Oates, 2006: 378, emphasis original) complains about his condition:

Sometimes when I'm driving I feel my – I guess it's my brain? – my 'consciousness'? – start to go out. Like a candle flame. I want only to close my eyes. The yearning is so strong.

Swan experiences the pressure of transformative power on a physical level. However, he does not fictionalise his simulacrum and holds on to his rational reasoning. In comparison, Clara guards her chosen identity, persevering in her aspiration for success.

Clara succeeds for most of life in spite of economic hardship and social rejection. She is assertive and determined to playfully fictionalise her desires. To shed more light on Clara's development in the text, it is important to notice that her character embraces self-reliance. She (Oates, 2006: 131) says, "She figured that God had more important things to care about than Clara Walpole". She dismisses spirituality as something too distant and does not follow any human role models. Instead, Clara (Oates, 2006: 159) relies on her vision and dreams, confidently announcing, "I can take care of myself". The only comfort that Clara accepts is a fictional representation that offers an alternative vision of reality. Therefore, Clara (Oates, 2006: 208) is interested in art:

"Paintings and music were meant to turn things into other things, Clara thought, so that the sunset in pictures could make you cry while the real thing had no meaning at all".

She experiences art as something to help her endure challenges and tragic events. Art offers a new perspective that she considers transformative. As art is timeless, it mirrors creative perspectives that can serve at different occasions in life.

Swan (Oates, 2006: 380) grasps the intention of his mother and thinks that "Clara had married [Revere] because he had money, and he was older and would die". About the eventual death of Revere's first wife, Clara (Oates, 2006: 271) says, "it took her so long to die", which suggests the self-interest of Clara. In Clara's games, she is determined to win, she (Oates, 2006: 164) thinks, "If a person wanted something bad enough, Clara thought, he should get it. If he wished for something hard enough, he should get it." She desires an economic improvement, and she achieves it. Clara (Oates, 2006: 135) says, "If nobody gives me what I want, I'll steal it. I want something—I am gonna get it". Mary Allen (1987: 62) calls Clara's acts "deterministic responses to negative conditions". In her games, Clara ignores the moral aspect of her actions. Not selecting the values according to their ethical determination, the character of Clara corresponds to the permissive aestheticization affirming the plurality of opinions.

## Conclusion

In Oates' text, the traditional is avoided by the protagonist in order to pursue her desire. In order to do that, Oates' aspiring character fashions a new identity and re-invent herself. By reflecting on American society in her text, Oates (2006: 401) says in the Afterword of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*:

*A Garden of Earthly Delights* is a wholly realistic portrayal of that world, but it isn't so much a novel about victims as it is about the way in which individuals define themselves and make of themselves "Americans" – which is to say, resolutely not victims.

Oates' texts are described by Calvin Bedient (1987: 17) as "overreaching, the 'experimental' excitement, in human relationships". Not only within human relationships, but also in relation to an inner self, Oates' characters seek to affirm their unique singularity that they prioritise. Clara manifests her desire, ignores moral conventions, and isolates herself from the community. She shapes her own future by eliminating her past and roots. The characters of Oates frequently detach themselves from their history, which Friedman (1980: 110) identifies as their "lost [original] identity", and re-invent a new one. The author depicts the ambiguity of Clara's preferences, which clash with conventional ethics.

Under her influence, Swan feels that he can succeed only by fictionalising himself. He recognises that there is an inner will struggling to get out. However, Swan despises his resemblance to Clara and the chaos that she creates. He aspires to organise the

chaos of his life, however, extends himself only to become the killer of both himself and his presumed father. In contrast, Clara defeats the unfair circumstances of her life, but she loses her social network and gains the reputation of being a manipulating individual. She seduces a married man whose wife is on her death bed, and intentionally enjoys her new life at the expense of others. Faced with the choice of love or money, Clara prefers affluence. Others tolerate her only because of her husband's social standing, so after his murder and Swan's suicide, Clara remains alone. In the Afterword of *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, Oates (2006: 404) says:

The trajectory of social ambition and social tragedy dramatised by the Walpoles seems to me as relevant to the twenty-first century as it had seemed in the late 1960s, not dated but bitterly enhanced by our current widening disparity between social classes in America. *Haves and have-nots* is too crude a formula to describe this great subject, for as Swan Walpole discovers, to *have*, and not to *be*, is to have lost one's soul.

Oates sets the novel during the unstable aftermath of the Great Depression, and the plot culminates during the consequent decades that are challenged by the philosophical conflict of individual self-determination and pluralism of opinions. Oates' Clara experiences an urge to fictionalise herself, her game of re-invention advancing as the text unfolds. About composing *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, the author (2006: 398-399) says:

The novel-to-be springs into a visionary sort of life like something glimpsed: an immense mosaic, a film moving at a swift pace. You "see"-but you can't keep up with that pace. The novel opens before you like a dream, drawing you into it, yet it's a dream in which you are somehow participating, and not merely a passive observer.

By Oates' vision of the United States, Ian Gregson (2006: 95) identifies her role of novelist as one that must, "dramatise the nightmares of [her] time". In her Quartet, the author designs space for the polyphony of dreams whose pursuits clash with the authentic setting. According to Oates, an idealised picture of America obscures harsh realities. Her fiction emphasises the human struggle between a societal majority of moral consciousness and the minority that is represented by individual valuation in the 1950s. She portrays the journey of individual re-invention as a relentless process. Besides this, Oates also articulates the ultimate effects of the fictional re-invention that affirms chaos upon individual characters as well as the community.

### Data availability

Specific datasets generated during the current study are not publicly available as they form part of the author's on-going research. They are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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### Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval is not applicable.

### Informed consent

Informed consent for written communication with the author Joyce Carol Oates was obtained for this publication.

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