

# An Analysis of *The Falls* from the Perspective of Gothic

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**Abstract**—This research studied the Gothic traditions in *The Falls* from its themes, languages and mysterious setting. Though Joyce Carol Oates may refuse to be characterized as a Gothic writer, more often than not she is regarded as such for the all-encompassing violence and deaths in her works. She treats the Gothic traditions as an appropriate way to obtain her writing objectives. Instead of sticking to the old Gothic conventions rigidly, she revises it in creative and ingenious ways. This research also focuses on its mysterious setting. In traditional Gothic fictions, the scenes are often set in gloomy places like the dark subterranean castles, the outlandish and desolate houses, and the confined decaying abbey. However, the Gothic novels develop with times and acquire new features. In *The Falls*, Oates places her story against the modern scenic spot Niagara Falls, which is the symbol of supernatural power and seduces people to do many unimaginably queer things. To conclude, *The Falls* has a kinship with the Gothic traditions in terms of its themes, languages and settings. With this Gothic tradition in *The Falls*, Oates successfully arouses readers' interest and exposes the darkness of the society.

**Index Terms**—Oates, *The Falls*, Gothic, death, violence

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word “Gothic” originally refers to some barbaric tribes in Scandinavian Peninsula. In a letter to the pope, the Italian painting master Raphael first used the word “Gothic” to criticize an architectural type in the north and central Europe, a style that represented the Catholic idea of theology. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Horace Walpole turned his abode into “a little Gothic castle,” established a printing press, and published *The Castle of Otranto*. This novel had a huge influence which eventually resulted in a literary genre called “Gothic novel,” partly because Walpole wrote his book in his “Gothic castle,” partly because the content was related to the Middle Ages, and partly because it told things that were wild, bloody, and barbarous. Walpole was imitated by many writers all over the European continent and America. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Gothic fiction made its way into a new continent—America. While the British tradition of the Gothic has exerted a strong influence over American authors of Gothic fiction, some have posited a distinct American Gothic genre, which utilizes different recurring elements and themes from that of the British tradition.

Under the influence of British and European Gothic from abroad, the Gothic mode came into being in the American fictions. Gothic cultural role has been entirely paradoxical: an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and the pursuit of happiness, a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow. The writers of the new republic were deeply influenced by the narrative situations, conflicts, settings, and motifs that made British Gothic so popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The perverse pleasures that acquired conventional status in the Gothic by the early nineteenth century—claustrophobia, atmospheric, gloom, the imminence of violence were generated in early American literature too, and by such standard architectural locales as the haunted house, the prison, the tomb, and by such familiar plot elements as the paternal curse and the vengeful ghost. However, the specificity of American Gothic, what makes it distinctively American, does not come just from formulaic plots and situations of an aristocratic genre being adapted to the democratic situation of the new world, but also comes from the penetrating psychological description.. It achieves the ultimate effects of the haunted, the uncanny and the return of the repressed while placing these thoroughly in the depths of American life and the American psyche.

Botting summarize the feature of Gothic in term of literature, saying that it refers to the fiction which has a mysterious and depressing atmosphere. Early Gothic novel is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroine preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the evil villain, of ghosts, vampires and monsters (Botting, 1996, p. 17).

Abrams gives a definition to Gothic in Literature saying that it

set in a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels and the typical story focuses on the sufferings imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain, and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences, The principal aim was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors. (Abrams, 2004, p. 111)

Their statement point out that the Gothic writings create feelings of gloom, mystery, terror, suspense and fear as they seek to explore humanity's dark side and arouse questions in mankind concerning good vs. evil, the role of the supernatural, the experience of fear or terror, and others.

Born on 16 June 1938 in Lockport, New York, the prolific and versatile writer Joyce Carol Oates began her writing

career since the publication of *By the North Gate* in 1963. Until now she has published more than fifty novels and novellas, thirty-one short story collections, eight poetry collections, eight drama collections, twelve essays and nonfictions, seventeen anthologies, and eight books for teenagers. As one representative of contemporary female writers, Joyce Carol Oates has won countless awards, among which is National Book Award for *them* in 1970, Bram Stoker Award for Novel for *Zombie* in 1996, and Prix Femina Etranger for *The Falls* in 2005, etc. She is praised as “the finest American novelist, man or woman since Faulkner” (Johnson, 1998, p. xvii). For more than twenty-five years, Oates has been rumored to be a favorite to win the Nobel Prize in Literature by critics.

Along with the stunning quantity and awards is her flexible employment of different literary devices in her works: stream of consciousness, flashback, the use of pastiche, the gothic elements and other experimental forms. Oates's novels, for instance, include naturalistic portrayals of suburban inner-city life such as *them* and Victorian family sagas such as *Bellefleur*; but then she can also write a Gothic Romance like *Bloodsmoor Romance*, the historical detective story *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, suspense thrillers such as her Rosamund Smith novels, among a variety of other literary ventures. Sage L. in *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists* comments that “few contemporary writers have more styles than Joyce Carol Oates. She is the traveling writer equally at home with Gothic, realism, romance and detection” (Sage, 1992, p. 186). Her novel *The Falls* severs reflects her diversified writing skills and arouses much interest among readers since its publication.

Focusing around the central image “Niagara Falls”, *The Falls* tells the ups and downs of Ariah's life. Firstly, her newly-wed husband plunges himself into the falls; then she settles down in the Luna Park around the falls with her second husband Dirk; after her children grow up, she wishes to bring the kids to the falls, which in the same way appeals to the kids. Finally, the novel ends with Dirk's memorial held nearby the falls. The falls are within the readers' sight throughout the novel.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Oates often uses gothic conventions in her novels and short stories; however, she does this so subtly that her readers realize the mythological and terrifying elements of her fiction only after careful reading. For example, it is only after finishing and pondering the events in *The Falls* that a careful reader fully understands that the story has taken her into the surreal labyrinth of the human psyche.

In 1993, Fonseca A. J. in his dissertation *Horriifying women, terrifying men* made a gender-based study of sexual horror in the fiction of Joyce Carol Oates, he comes to the conclusion that Oates's terrifying male characters are of two basic types: the terrifying stranger and the tyrannical, almost vampire lover (Fonseca, 1993, pp.135-145).

In the same year, Yuan examines the images of women in selected works of Oates, and observes that most of her women characters are miserable, pathetic, and even unbearable for they easily fall prey to violence imposed on them (Yuan, 1993, p. vi).

In 2002, Senenal N.A. considers Oates as the woman writer of violence in her dissertation *Representations of Violent Women* (Senenal, 2002, p. 45), and she suggests readers should connect women's violence with social circumstances. Concerning violence, Sonser A.M. holds that the most basic element of both the classic Gothic tale and the fiction of Oates is the central role of the female victim, she argues in her dissertation “*Subversion, Seduction, and the Culture of Consumption: The American Gothic Revisited in the Work of Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, and Anne Rice.*” that the seductive in the contemporary Gothic heightens the uncertainty and dislocation of the self as well as the terror of existence in a commodity culture (Sonser, 1999, pp.1-17).

Chinese scholars have also done extensive research regarding the connection between the Gothic and the works by Oates. For example, Liu in *Gothic Realism in Joyce Carol Oates's Fictions* investigates the novels of Oates's from four perspectives, namely, serial killer as the modern Gothic villain; from the victim to the victimizer; destruction of the American family and violence in social relations, then draw a conclusion that Oates adopts the Gothic style to dramatize maladies of the American life (Liu, 2007, pp. 1-3).

The publication of *The Fall* in 2004 draws much attention from scholars both at home and abroad. The majority of the critics take notice of the ecological motif revealed by the novel. For instance, Heltzel maintains:

In a career so prolific that this is her 48th novel. It's impossible to call *The Falls* Oates's fictional masterpiece. Yet, in depicting a paradigm shift that permanently altered this country's political and environmental awareness, *The Falls* ranks as one of her best.

Rafferty T. holds Oates speaks about class, economic injustice and the destruction of the environment clearly and strongly

In China, *The Falls* also arouses hot discussions. It was first introduced to Chinese readers by Zou (2004, p. 36). Afterwards, Tan (2005, pp. 15-17) in his article “*Niagara Falls: the Turbulent Torrent of Love and Life*” made a more detailed comment on the novel. In this article the author believed the novel express the helplessness of lower class people under the cruel social condition. She also approached the novel from a postmodernism perspective, pointing out the postmodern narrative techniques employed by Oates, e.g. the indeterminacy of the narrative voices, different types of speech and pastiche. The Chinese version translated by Guo was published in 2006. In the preface of *The Falls*, Guo (2004, pp. 1-5) considered *The Falls* as Oates best work up till now. Guo thinks this novel reflects our horror and respect towards nature, and this opinion is shared with many other Chinese critics, e.g. Zhang, Gao, Xu. Zhang (2007, p.

1-9) explores the enlightenment of the story: human being is just a part of creatures in the world, and other living beings also deserve concern and respect Gao (2008, p. 130) thinks the novel displays a rich and profound moral world constituted by human being and nature. Xu (2006, p. 92) holds that it exposed the dark side of capitalism and people should protect environment and cultivate an ecological awareness.

Besides the ecological reading of the novel, some scholars interpret it from the angle of gender awareness. Zhang examine the three male characters in *The Fall*, and discovered the heroic spirits, dignity and courage hidden in their inner world. In 2008, Guo (2008, p. 2) writes a thesis about the studies on symbolic meaning of the novel in the light of myth-archetypal theory. The newly published article by Xu (2010, p. 112) analyzed its narrative skill and praised its successful combination of traditional and non-traditional narrative skill.

The study of *The Fall* is an ongoing one, but it is a pity that none have done any exclusive and systematical study concerning its gothic gender. In light of this situation, this research will make an in-depth interpretation from its gothic angle, in hope of finding how Oates employs the Gothic tradition to criticize the darkness in modern American society and culture.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although Gothic novels have undergone various changes in the past 200 years, death and violence still remains one of its most typical themes. So the researcher first studied a series of deaths and violence in this novel, and then went to discuss the novel's mysterious setting, which is a typical practice in Gothic writing.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Common themes in Gothic works are horrible violence, death, rape, incest, vengeance, skepticism about religion and the fight between good and evil, etc. For instance, *Wuthering Heights* is a story about vengeance, human nature and morality; *The Monk* focuses on death and the fight between good and evil. This research will put an emphasis on how violence and death--the eternal themes in Gothic novels are reflected in this novel.

#### A. Violence

One distinctive tradition of Gothic novels is to evoke chilling terror by exploring horrible violence and death, so death and violence are conventional themes in the Gothic writing. Kerr regards that "scenes of violence are so characteristic of Gothic themes and patterns that they are too diverse to allow specification" (Kerr, 1979, p. 24). Oates is regarded as a Gothic writer because of the abundant death and violence in her works. In this part violence and death will be analyzed from the following perspectives: Oates's vision of violence and death; violent language and the significances of deaths in *The Falls*.

Though Oates has never admitted to be a writer of Gothic fantasy, her novels are more often than not inundated with senseless violence. Her fascination with violence and death has something to do with her personal experience and memory. Born in a working-class family in a small town of Lockport, she described her childhood as miserable days when interviewed, saying that a lot of things frightened her in the schoolhouse, included the rough and tall boys and tales of incest, etc. Her family background really has a profound influence on her outlook and her writing. She comes from a family in which one of her relatives was murdered and another committed suicide. After marriage, she moved Detroit where she experienced the Detroit Riot. She admits that plenty of her writing draws on their experiences, and she firmly believes that narrative fiction can give people some enlightenment through depicting what real life is like. She claims the violence is part of American character, and she considers the Gothic mode as an appropriate way to explore this contemporary experience and existence

In *Carol Oates Conversations 1970-2006*, a journalist asked Oates why difficult and troubling works of art are more beneficial to readers than happy ones, she said:

Well, the classic theory of tragedy is that it allows people to be ennobled. We see people pushing the limits of their courage and their involvement. Serious works of art push people to the extreme. That is why creative artists try risking things that could fail, because they feel that is how they learn more about themselves. (Johnson, 2006, p. 162)

In other words, Oates holds that the brutal truth of violence and death urge people to learn more about themselves. When talking about her artistic vision, she said:

Art is built around violence, around death; at its base is fear. The absolute dream, if dreamed, must deal with death, and the only way toward death we understand is the way of violence. (Oates, 1972, p. 11)

Words like "violence," "death" and "fear" reveal Oates's kinship with the Gothic tradition. The following passage will discuss how violence and death contribute to her Gothic writing.

Among the Gothic elements adopted extensively in Oates's works of Gothicism, the most prominent and persistent one is probably violence. In the Gothic, violence is used to seek sensation, to expose human bestiality, and to prepare for the ultimate justice; however in Oates's work, the function of violence is more complex and profound. Readers familiar with Oates's work will not be surprised to learn that critics frequently focus on her intense and forceful descriptions of brutality and injustice. One of the common themes in the reviews of Oates's works is the claim that violence is her usual subject matter. *The Falls* reveals her long-standing interest in the extreme, the gruesome, the

bizarre and violence in American life.

Oates has always been controversial for her great productivity and much violence in her writing. Some critics have consistently been offended by her abundant use of violent subject matter, which includes her tendency to portray characters in states of mental extremity bordering on madness. For instance, her award-winning works *Them* and *Foxfire: Confession of a Girl Gang* are renowned for the prevalent violence and even receive complaints from the worried parents.

Violence in the traditional Gothic tends to take place at midnight or in a dark environment, but in Oates's fictional world it stalks in broad daylight. Instead of separation from the everyday life as it is in the traditional Gothic, violence in *The Falls* permeates daily life, households and neighborhood.

Grant once comments on violence in Oates's works saying that most activities in her fictive world are "performed violently; conversations are angry and charged with hostility, the interaction between characters is often brutal and savage" (Grant, 1978, p. 93).

For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Oates describes Arianah's feeling violently:

Her head was ringed in pain as if in a vise. Her bowels were sick as if the very intestines were corroded and rotting. In this unfamiliar bed smelling of damp linen, damp flesh and desperation. (p.8)

By describing even the most ordinary human feeling in terms of brutality and cruelty, Oates creates a totally violent fictive world. In this world, even the most subtle feeling was exaggerated and elaborated.

Violence in Oates's works often occurs in a familiar environment, and people who undergo these horrified experiences are ordinary people. Accordingly violence appears through various manifestations in everyday life: in men's sexual desire, in women's searching for self-fulfillment, in rebellion and oppression.

For example, when Gilbert jumped into the falls, Oates elaborates his feeling in the violent language, "within ten swift seconds his skull was broken, his brain and its seemingly ceaseless immortal voice extinguished forever," "his backbone was snapped, and snapped, and snapped like the dried," "his body was flung lifeless as a rag doll at the foot of the Horseshoe Falls, lifted and dropped and lifted again amid the rocks" (p. 38). This violent language depicts Gilbert's suffering vividly, and helps create a horrible image. The author explains the process of dying in great detail, for example, the change of the victim's tone, body flavor and the color of the corpse etc. The "video-recording" close-up shot brings about the direct visual stimulus to the readers. Meanwhile, this description sets off a kind of horrified, ailing, inexpressible atmosphere and makes the readers deeply immersed in an unbearable horror.

As for Gilbert's body, the author again uses the most violent language to describe it, "he was naked, hairless, finger-and toenails gone" (p. 84), his skin had "peeled away and a reddish-brown dermal layer was exposed" (p. 85), his swollen tongue protruded from mouth. This elaborated description of the corpse endows a horrible atmosphere, too.

All these violent language is Gothic in their morbidity and gloom, and they stimulate the psychological organs, resulting in a strong shocking effect and causing overwhelming terror.

Why does Oates use so much violence in her creation? Firstly, violence causes terror and brings aesthetic delight; secondly, she doesn't want to turn a blind eye to the dark side of American life, so she uses this horrifying manner to arouse the readers' attention and alert people.

## B. Death

Gothic representations of death are so resonant because they occur in a realm clearly delineated as other than ordinary, the supernatural realm of ghosts and spirits, of revenants and vampires, of monsters and zombies, as they also touch on torture, murder and a transgressive desire for destruction. Death becomes attractive, because it is apparently unreal, the result of exaggerated passions, revealing itself in the midst of hallucinatory delusions and involving characters that have been transposed into worlds made unfamiliar, either because they are located in some distant historical past or because the setting is from the start a phantasmatic one. These stories fascinate with chilling horror, because they allow us to indirectly confront death and even our own death.

With respect to Gothic fiction, the dead bodies everywhere and often bleeding unusually remind us that the ultimate source of all terror is death itself. In fact, the frequented castle, the underground passageway, the secret tomb, and the sealed room evoke anxiety because they pose the implicit threat of fatal enclosure. So it is quite understandable that why so many deaths exist in the Gothic fictions.

Oates thinks death deals with the deepest questions of human existence and the meaning of life as well as questions of the presence or possibility of order in the shaping of reality. The events of death prevail in *The Falls* and each one has its own unique way and special connotation.

For example, at the beginning Gilbert commits suicide by throwing himself into the falls; his death signifies the contradiction between his homosexual love and the religious belief. Before he commits suicide, he makes a gesture of farewell, which is a "mock salute, a salute of defiance" (p. 6). He uses his death to defy the false belief that God is omnipotence, and he has "no need of a soul" (p.6). In his mind, only through death can he get consolation and peace in mind. To him, death is the way out. His death also reveals people's helplessness and loneliness in this consumerism-oriented modern society.

However, Dirk's death is a brave one because he dies for an honorable career: justice. He is murdered by the policeman, which exposes the dark side of the society and its senseless people. His death leaves an irreparable damage to his family, for quite a long time, his family refuse to accept it. His name becomes a taboo, for them, it is a shame at

that time. However, about 15 years later, people and his family eventually recognize his death as a respected one.

As for Mr. Mayweather, his death is a desperate one, signifying the useless government. After he gets fired, no one care him, and he is at a loss, not knowing how to deal with it. He has a desolate soul, in this sense, it echoes the Gothic spirit: grotesqueness, mystery and desolateness in human's internal world.

Juliet, the daughter of Dirk, ponders on the meaning of death. She doubts death is a vision; people may see this vision before they die, just like the dairymaid sees the vision of Virgin Mary. She thinks: "I would not need to be saved if the vision came to me. The vision would be enough" (p. 446). Her attitude towards death reflects people's maze about the significance of death and life. Contemporary life constantly reminds readers that they are moving toward death, or at least obsolescence and that they must continually strive to hold together. Paradoxically people need the consistent consciousness of death provided by the Gothic in order to understand and want that life. Choosing death as one of the themes, Oates in effect questions and demonstrates her deep concern about the living state of human being.

It can be concluded that death in *The Falls* arrives in various shapes and dramatizes the interpenetration of life and death and the mingling of opposites beyond the senses. These descriptions of violence and deaths in *The Falls* endow a horrible atmosphere both physically and psychologically, thus meet the unique aesthetic need for a Gothic story.

### C. Gothic Setting

Setting is the background and is a means of creating appropriate atmosphere. David Punter summarizes the characteristics of Gothic fiction as

an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic setting, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to develop and perfect techniques of literary suspense. (Punter, 1980, p. 11)

In other words, mystery and supernatural are distinctive features of Gothic writing. In traditional Gothic fictions, the scenes are often set in gloomy places like the dark subterranean vault, the outlandish and desolate castles, the decaying abbey, and the confined cloisters in the Middle Ages. For example, the background of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is a remote castle with distinctive Gothic style--- antique courts and ruined turrets, deserted and haunted chamber, dark and eerie galleries. These architectural settings help created atmosphere conducive to mystery and anxiety in the protagonist and other characters. Emily Bronte, for instance, drew repeatedly on landscapes to throw into high relief the emotional explosions that occur throughout the novel. However, American authors had no castles, abbeys, nor cloisters in the near proximity that European authors had, thus American Gothic tended to foreground other varieties of tangibles.

In *The Falls*, Oates creatively manipulates the Gothic tradition in the grotesque story setting. She replaces the castle in Gothic romance with familiar scenic spot---Niagara Falls, which is also called Suicide's Paradise. The weather depiction contains much Gothic color because it is often overcast and ponderous, the limestone resembles lead. Through this setting, Oates foregrounds its supernatural power and its magic spell. The supernatural, or otherwise inexplicable events, is a typical characteristic of Gothic novel. "In protest against the meaningless presentation of realistic details in realistic fiction, the writers of the Gothic novels indulged in creating extraordinary situations of mystery and terror even with the aid of the supernatural" (Howells, 1995, p. 98). She comments that Niagara Falls as a mystical, mythic force of nature influence the characters' lives in specific, dramatic ways. It

exerted its malevolent spell, that never weakened...But if you drifted too near, even out of curiosity, you were in danger: beginning to think thoughts of unnatural to your personality as if the thunderous waters were thinking for you, depriving you of your will (p. 57).

This straightforward description of the supernatural power set the tone for the story---mystery. The vague, abstract expression like "malevolent spell" and "depriving you of your will" helps elevate this impression to a feeling of unspeakable fear. When standing besides the falls, visitors will unconsciously be summoned, seducing them to do the most inconvincible things. For example, Gilbert feels "the thunderous river had called to him," the fall seems to convey an adventurous message: "come! Here is peace" (p. 26). Under this mysterious spell, Gilbert surrenders and jumps into the falls.

Under the similar spell, Juliet almost gets herself killed. She experiences the supernatural and mysterious power when she tries to find information about her father Dirk. She always feels there is a voice in the falls, which allures her to the falls. The imaginary voice of her father is an eerie sign of how she herself feels like ghost and lost. For Juliet, the voice is mysterious (and thus horrifying) because it is something she unconsciously desires---to follow her father.

The mysterious and supernatural setting is superior to the visible and material and are feared or held in awe accordingly. It seems that belief in supernatural power shares the feature of almost every culture in the world. The imposing and mysterious landscape overwhelms and dwarfs the visitors, and to some extent, it serves as a modern version of the incomprehensible castle or monastery of early Gothic. It scares readers and inspires human's imagination, which is the typical characteristic of Gothic novels.

Besides the supernatural falls, another favorite Gothic moonlit landscape often appears in the fiction. The moon is intended to awaken nocturnal atmosphere fraught with mystery. For example, it is the background for Dirk's quarrel with his wife Ariah. On that night, the glaring pale moon witnesses their fight, and the surprising rough wind enhances the mystery. Another night under the moon, Ariah sees the illusion of Dirk jumping into the falls. Moonlit also contains symbolic meaning when Dirk is released from prison. The moon is "so bright it hurts his eyes," yet he smiles. It implies he had firm faith in his behavior, and he will never feel guilt of betraying his family and friends for the justice.

Apart from the moon, and the falls, the house at 7 Luna Park, to some extent, can be regarded as the equivalent of the Gothic castle, because it serves as an enclosed space, where the heroine locks herself. She shuts herself in the house, and is reluctant to read newspapers, let alone associates with others. This secluded house represents her closed internal world. These unique scene arrangement echoes the isolated atmosphere built by the castle and monastery with thick wall, thus leave readers in a deeper mystery and terror.

Moreover, the setting of the gothic novels also has something to do with the historical background. Although the story begins from 1950, it includes a flashback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Dirk's grandparents' generation. This historical setting makes the novel full of mystery.

It is no doubt that the setting of the novel contains distinctive gothic element, it helps convey the mysterious and gloomy atmosphere that anticipate the horrible happenings. From the above discussed, readers can safely say that Oates creates a grotesque world through the choice of mysterious settings.

## V. CONCLUSION

In over-200-year development, Gothic writing has undergone various changes. With the influence of social or political background at different times, it acquires new features and generates a variety of sub-genres, such as female Gothic, southern Gothic, suburban Gothic, etc. But its basic features remain consistent. Generally speaking, Gothic writings create feelings of gloom, mystery, terror, suspense and fear as they seek to explore the dark side of humanity and society.

Acclaimed as a versatile and productive writer, Oates obviously favors the Gothic tradition in her creation. Books like *Zombie* and *Bloodsmoor Romance* manifest her excellence in Gothic writing. *The Falls* is no exception. The Gothic tradition in *The Falls* allows Oates to explore human being's psychology as well as American culture's darkness effectively from the following perspectives.

Firstly, she touches upon the horrible violence and death in American society. The fiction begins from 1950s when racism prevails and riots happen frequently. Under this social background, Oates sets violence and death in *The Falls* against a familiar environment. In the book, the people who undergo these horrified experiences are ordinary people, whose experiences can evoke chilling terror and shock the readers out of their blind optimism about America.

To foreground its Gothic themes and product psychological impact, Oates sets the fiction against an atmosphere of mystery and grotesqueness. She reveals some of the most morbid and horrifying aspects of individual's existence through people's obsession with youth, imagination of ghost and terrifyingly nightmare, etc.

Gothic machinery thus becomes an effective means for Oates to conduct an in-depth examination of American history and culture and to a large extent it contributes to the success of *The Falls*.

The twentieth century saw various changes like AIDS, homosexuality and environmental pollution, etc. These events to some extent inspire new practice of the Gothic tradition. Under this background, Oates revises it in creative and ingenious ways instead of sticking to the old Gothic convention rigidly.

For example, in the choice of location, Oates chooses the famous scenic spot "Niagara Falls" to replace the traditional Gothic castle in order to remain relevant to the modern time, but still gain the desired aim—to endow a mysterious atmosphere. Through this originality of her adaptation of the Gothic tradition and imaginative power of her creation, Oates added to the richness of the Gothic heritage and won a prominent place in the Gothic world. Her achievement wins her a permanent position in the literary world, and her genius and talent are gaining an increasing appreciation and popularity.

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