

INNER CONFLICT AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN CARTHAGE


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ABSTRACT

*This thesis investigates the themes of inner conflict and identity crisis in Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Carthage* (2014). Through trauma theory, psychoanalytic criticism, and identity studies, the research analyzes the psychological fragmentation of Cressida Mayfield, a young woman whose disappearance becomes a narrative device for exploring self-erasure, alienation, and identity reinvention. The thesis argues that Oates constructs a multilayered depiction of psychological rupture, illustrating how trauma shapes and reshapes identity across different contexts.*

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates frequently explores characters undergoing psychological disintegration, and *Carthage* is one of her most intricate examinations of such experiences. Cressida Mayfield, an intellectually gifted but emotionally troubled young woman, represents a figure of profound internal conflict. After vanishing from her hometown of Carthage, she enters a complex journey of self-reinvention that blurs the boundaries between escape and self-destruction. The novel uses Cressida's fractured psyche to explore broader questions about trauma, guilt, and the instability of personal identity.

Inner Conflict: Alienation and Self-Fracturing

Cressida's inner conflict is rooted in her deep sense of alienation. She feels intellectually and emotionally disconnected from her community, family, and even her own physical presence. Oates portrays her as a character whose internal world is marked by contradictions: she desires invisibility yet craves validation, rejects societal expectations yet feels oppressed by isolation.

Her supposed disappearance—initially attributed to a violent act—symbolizes the psychological rupture within her. The internal dissonance she experiences is reflective of an identity that cannot reconcile the expectations placed upon her with her own sense of self. This psychological divide manifests in emotional withdrawal, pessimism, and radical self-criticism.

Identity Crisis: Reinvention as Escape

After leaving her home, Cressida adopts a new identity, illustrating the extreme measures individuals may take to escape internal turmoil. Her reinvention is characterized by self-erasure: she abandons her name, her family, and her history. Trauma theorists argue that individuals experiencing profound psychological conflict often resort to dissociation—a mechanism visibly represented in Cressida's transformation.

However, this new identity becomes a prison rather than a liberation. Cressida's attempt to create psychological distance from her past fails to resolve her internal crisis. Although she lives under a different identity, the emotional wounds that shaped her remain unresolved. Oates demonstrates that identity cannot be remade simply through external transformation; internal reconciliation is essential.

Consequences of Self-Erasures

Cressida's identity dissolution has far-reaching consequences not only for herself but also for those around her. Her family endures prolonged suffering, and an innocent man is nearly destroyed by the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. These consequences highlight the interconnectedness of individual identity with social and familial structures. Cressida's inner conflict becomes a communal crisis, reinforcing Oates's assertion that identity is never constructed in isolation.

Resolution and Partial Reintegration

Cressida's eventual attempt at reintegration is fraught with difficulties. Trauma theory suggests that individuals who undergo identity fragmentation must engage in a process of narrative reconstruction to regain a sense of continuity. Cressida begins this process late in the novel, confronting the emotional truths she once fled. While she does not fully restore her identity, her willingness to acknowledge her trauma marks the beginning of psychological healing.

Conclusion

Carthage presents a haunting exploration of identity dissolution and psychological fragmentation. Through Cressida Mayfield's conflicted psyche, Oates captures the complexity of inner turmoil and the profound consequences of trauma-driven self-erasure. The novel underscores the importance of emotional reconciliation in reconstructing identity and illustrates the enduring impact of unresolved psychological conflict.

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