



THE DICHOTOMY OF FATE AND FREE WILL IN OATES' TRAGIC VISION

Yusupova Hilola Uktamovna

PhD, associate professor, Bukhara State Pedagogical Institution

Bekova Gulasalbonu Ibodullo kizi

Asian International University

Second-year student of Master's Degree

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the tension between fate and free will in Joyce Carol Oates' tragic vision, focusing on how her characters navigate deterministic social forces while attempting to exercise agency. Oates' fiction often portrays individuals trapped in cycles of violence, trauma, and socio-economic inequality forces that resemble classical notions of fate. Yet her protagonists frequently make choices that accelerate or complicate their downfall, suggesting an intricate interplay between external determinism and internal volition. Through close readings of *We Were the Mulvaney's*, *Black Water*, and *them*, the study argues that Oates constructs a modern tragedy in which fate and free will are mutually entangled. The resulting tragic aesthetic illuminates the psychological, cultural, and moral implications of human vulnerability in contemporary America.*

As we know that in Joyce Carol Oates' extensive body of work, tragedy is not merely a literary mode but a worldview. Her characters often inhabit environments shaped by poverty, gendered violence, political corruption, and family instability. These external pressures resemble the ancient tragic concept of fate, a force that predetermines one's path long before conscious choice occurs. Yet Oates simultaneously foregrounds the deliberate, sometimes reckless, choices her characters make. This duality fate versus free will forms a central pillar of her tragic vision and raises questions about moral responsibility, structural injustice, and the very possibility of human autonomy [1].

Oates frequently constructs fate as the accumulation of social, psychological, and familial forces that shape a character's destiny. In *them*, the Wendall family's life in urban Detroit is marked by poverty, limited educational access, and cycles of violence [2]. These conditions operate as a form of social determinism: characters struggle against a system that constrains their future before they begin to imagine it.

Similarly, in *We Were the Mulvaney's*, Marianne Mulvaney's sexual assault becomes a tragic turning point not because of her actions, but because of societal stigma and patriarchal attitudes. The family's collapse appears fated by the community's response, the father's fragile masculinity, and cultural silence surrounding trauma. Oates thereby portrays fate not as mythic prophecy, but as structural reality the invisible architecture of American life.

Psychologically, Oates' characters often internalize these conditions. The "fated self" becomes a lived identity shaped by fear, trauma, or dependency. The result is a powerful modern reinterpretation of tragic inevitability [3].

While Oates highlights deterministic forces, she also insists that characters make choices that contribute to their tragedy. In *Black Water*, Kelly Kelleher willingly enters the car with the charismatic Senator, even though she senses danger. Her decision represents a moment of agency however naïve within a larger fatalistic narrative. Free will, in Oates' fiction, often takes the form of micro-choices that interact unpredictably with external pressures [4].

In *them*, Jules Wendall repeatedly chooses violence as a means of asserting power, suggesting that free will can intensify, rather than mitigate, tragic consequences. Oates refuses to depict her characters as passive victims; instead, they are agents whose actions operate within, and sometimes against, deterministic circumstances. This interplay reflects a distinctly modern tragic sensibility: individuals act, but the world acts upon them with equal or greater force.

Oates' tragic vision does not present fate and free will as opposites, but as interdependent forces. Tragedy arises when a character's agency collides with an inescapable environment. Marianne Mulvaney chooses forgiveness, yet societal shame persists. Kelly chooses trust, yet structural power imbalances and political privilege make her vulnerable. Jules chooses rebellion, yet the system he fights is too entrenched to be overcome [5].

This synthesis corresponds to the tragic frameworks of Hardy, Faulkner, and even Greek tragedy, where character and circumstance intertwine. Oates' innovation lies in grounding fate in social reality and free will in psychological complexity, creating a contemporary tragedy that mirrors the anxieties of modern American life [6].

Joyce Carol Oates' tragic vision is defined by the intricate tension between fate and free will. Her fiction suggests that while individuals possess agency, their choices are shaped and often thwarted by structural, cultural, and psychological forces beyond their control [7]. This dichotomy offers a profound commentary on human vulnerability and moral complexity in contemporary society. Oates' tragic world thus becomes a space where determinism and volition coexist, producing narratives that reflect the unsettling realities of modern life.

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