

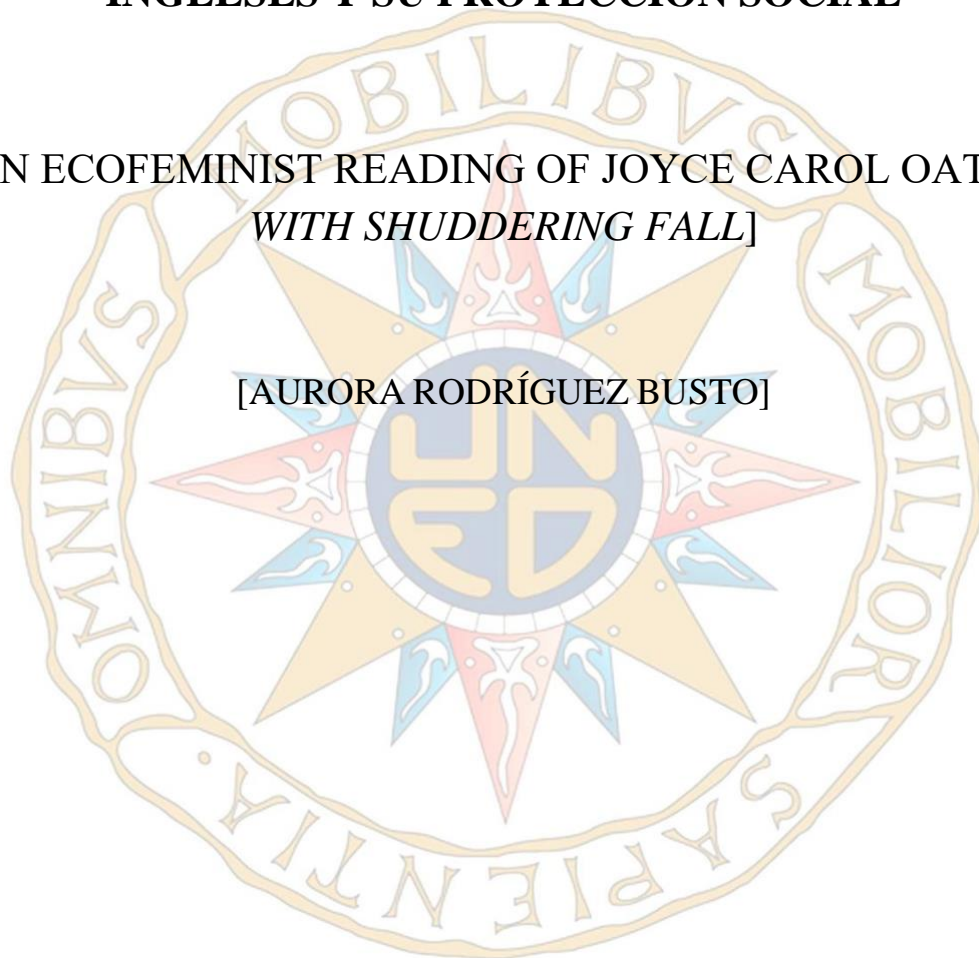


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**MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS Y CULTURALES
INGLESES Y SU PROYECCIÓN SOCIAL**

[AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF JOYCE CAROL OATES'
WITH SHUDDERING FALL]

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1. Introduction

In this final dissertation, I have chosen to do a close reading of American writer Joyce Carol Oates' first published novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), from an ecofeminist point of view. For this literary endeavor, I have used the knowledge obtained in my master's degree in English Literary and Cultural Studies. Oates is known for her massive literary career; she has been writing since before *With Shuddering Fall* and has not stopped yet. I decided to analyze her first novel from an ecofeminist point of view because I found the contrasting depiction of rural and urban life could be linked with the female protagonist's journey through abuse. The protagonist is a clear victim of patriarchal beliefs, which tragically make her a target for mistreatment. At first glance, the story may seem simpler than it really is, and I hope I have brought out as much meaning as possible from my analysis thanks to the ecofeminist perspective.

For the development of this final dissertation, I have read a lot of articles about the work of Oates, however, I did not find any analysis from an ecofeminist point of view. At first, I thought it could be because Oates herself has not linked her work to this theoretical framework, or because her books are not easily connected to ecofeminism. However, after investigating more about the author and reading as much as I could of her narrative, I discovered Oates is unequivocally connected to ecofeminism. The feminist part is obvious, Oates tends to write about female protagonists who suffer the results of living in a sexist world, and the environmental part is always surrounding the narrative too.

Oates grew up in the rural area of Lockport (New York) and Eden County, the fictional rural town where Karen lives at the beginning of the novel, is inspired by it. Oates has used rural Eden County as the setting for many of her stories, and it is no coincidence. The author emphasizes the rural world and farming in juxtaposition with male domination of nature, in the same sense the writer uses father figures as a representation of women's first contact with male authority and repression. All of this is present from her literary beginning. Oates reuses Eden County's rural setting the same way her first protagonist resembles many future Oates' main characters.

In this final dissertation, I will start by giving an overview of ecofeminism, since it is a theoretical background that has grown and changed since its beginning in the 20th century and has many branches nowadays. In this part, I will try to place my work within ecofeminism and give my own perspective on the matter. Secondly, I will analyze Oates' literary style and explore her work's connection with the natural world and ecofeminism,

specifically the novel I am discussing in this dissertation. Then, I will carry out an ecofeminist reading of the novel. For this, I will start by exploring how and why Oates uses the change of seasons as divisors, the novel is divided into three parts: spring, summer, and fall. I wanted to start the analysis with this because it showcases the strong connection between the protagonist and the natural world that surrounds her. The main character changes physically and mentally throughout the story, and her development is represented by the change of seasons, which are in turn a representation of nature's life cycle and have lately been altered by human activity.

Once I have analyzed the seasons, I will discuss the influence of religion, particularly Christianity, in the story. The protagonist's rural life is marked by attending church and listening to her father read her passages from the Bible. This has shaped the protagonist into a woman who accepts male authority as righteous and feels bad every time she dares to question it, and who believes she is to blame for being abused and that her suffering must be a test of her faith.

After this, I will go over Oates' deployment of rural life and farming in comparison with urban cities and racing cars as settings to showcase the different kinds of toxic masculinity that leads men to believe they have a right to control their environment by birth. I have chosen to explore this side because the novel emphasizes the duality between the two male figures who have the biggest influence, her father, and her abuser, specifically their professions. Racing is described as a representation of the changing image of masculinity, strong physical labor is being overtaken by having control over machines. And both types of activities are reserved for men.

Finally, I will analyze sexual abuse and its depiction in the novel in connection with ecofeminism. I will first go through the idea of objectification and derivatization in connection with sexual abuse, to understand better the codependent relationship between the main characters. I will also analyze how the female protagonist processes being abused from a young age and her belief that all men deep down want to abuse women. I will connect sexual abuse with the treatment of farm animals, to link the connection between the mistreatment of women and the natural world.

2. Ecofeminism and Literary Criticism

To understand the relationship between ecofeminism and literature, we should first go back to the origin of “ecofeminism”, coined in 1974 by French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne in *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, which she followed with *Féminisme: révolution ou mutation?* in 1978. As Barbara Gates explains in her 1996 essay *A Root of Ecofeminism Ecoféminisme*, d’Eaubonne work was published during a time of women protesting several natural atrocities committed by mankind. In the USA some infamous examples were the Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls, due to the dumping of toxic chemicals, and the Three Mile Island nuclear facility accident, which lead to dangerous leaks. Gates recognizes d’Eaubonne’s work as well as American Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *New Woman/New Earth* in 1975, as “a new way of seeing old problems: the linking of the devaluation of women and the earth” (Gates 8) d’Eaubonne pointed out the two biggest problems for humanity as overpopulation and the destruction of sources, she also identified who was responsible for both: the male System. As Gates explains, what d’Eaubonne did with the term “ecofeminism” was “refine and redefine” the political views of the French Ecologie-Feminism Centre which started the movement l’ecologie-féminisme.

In her books, d’Eaubonne states that although women should dominate due to their number and their role in reproduction, they have been reduced to a powerless minority whose reproductive functions are controlled by male-made legislations. The earth is treated the same as women: overpopulation and overurbanization are damaging both, making them “intimately linked” (Gates) d’Eaubonne confronts feminist activism with a root problem, women are always caring for others, for whatever is in their surroundings, other people, other species, without demanding power for themselves. She complained that “women have historically been wedded to other people and nature through a social imperative requiring caring and consideration”, and therefore ecofeminism should fight for human beings “be regarded as persons and not first and foremost as males or females” (Gates).

D’Eaubonne saw the 19th and 20th centuries as a showcase of the failures of the different political movements in the struggles of women and earth which made an ecofeminist revolution imperative for saving humanity’s future against extinction. She did not acknowledge pollution as a mere capitalist outcome, she saw both the US and the Soviet Union as lucrative polluters who repressed women too. She uses birth as an example of their common ground: while abortion was legal in the Soviet Union there was no development of contraceptive methods; on the other hand, in the US the contraceptive pill was seen as a

medical milestone while Native Americans had developed birth control methods a century ago. The main problem d'Eaubonne saw with governments was that they only focused on the economy without considering the effects on nature or humankind. She calls these male-dominated policies "unlimitism", and unchecked "patriarchal power over other countries and other people" (Gates 12).

Gates could already see some gaps in d'Eaubonne theory 20 years later, as her focus was on reproduction and revolution, while 90s ecofeminism was redirecting towards developing a theoretical base and facing global issues, not just Western civilization, or First World. Gates also explains that ecofeminism has tried to grow while fighting criticism and misconceptions, being labeled as essentialist, or abandoning the old-fashioned idea of women being more connected to nature than men. All these efforts were needed for the survival of ecofeminism and for it to be used practically, as in literary criticism. Gates questions if only texts which are written about ecological problems can be analyzed from an ecofeminist point of view. She sees the future of ecofeminism in a "biocentric rather than an anthropocentric viewpoint; an end to dualisms like male/female, thought/action, and spiritual/natural" (14).

Another important addition to the theory of Ecofeminism in the 90s came with German sociologist Maria Mies and Indian scholar Vandana Shiva's coauthored book *Ecofeminism*, first published in 1993. The text was reedited in 2014, and it serves as an example of the growth of ecofeminism from the 20th to the 21st century. In its second edition's introduction, written by Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer, the relationship between ecocriticism and ecofeminism is drawn. They state that while the term ecocriticism was born in the early 90s "rather loosely defined and fiercely contested" (Mies, Maria., et al 9) as an introduction of ecological concerns into literature and cultural studies, it somehow leveled up with other traditional methodologies such as structuralism, feminism, postcolonialism, to name a few. Gersdorf and Mayer cite Peter Barry's inclusion of the term in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2002) as proof of this. Even if they validate its addition they do not agree with Barry's view of ecocriticism as a movement that rejects "'social constructivism' and 'linguistic determination' of dominant literary theories" (Barry 2002:264). Gersdorf and Mayer prefer to think of ecocriticism as a theoretical methodology which "challenges established cultural, political and ethical normativities" adding that it should focus on "conceptualizations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorizations in literary and other cultural practices" (Mies, et al 10).

Nowadays, ecocritical studies have expanded with the growth of many other trends: translocalism, ecocosmopolitanism, posthumanism, queer ecology, new materialism, material feminism, etc., as analyzed in *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (2013). In the first chapter, Serpil Oppermann's "A Posthumanist Direction in Ecocritical Trajectory" analyzes how these new trends have shaped ecocriticism by boarding its theoretical framework and the definition of some basic terms such as "agency", "matter", and "body", and the implication of some current issues like racism and sexism.

Oppermann notes that many authors who were once part of the ecofeminist movement have distanced themselves from it due to the harsh criticism and antagonism of being linked to a movement that was labeled as essentialist. She claims that this is the reason why ecofeminism "has been transformed into an ecocritical discipline with more theoretical rigor and stronger socio-political and ethical positioning" (Opperman. 23). The author sees in these new studies such as material feminism, trans-corporeality, and feminist ecocriticism, the future of ecofeminism. A path towards an embodied knowledge in relation "to issues of sexuality, race, class, and gender, as well as environmental justice, health, risk, and activist issues" (24), a redefinition of the link between nature, the human and nonhuman. This explains the current fight against the tendency to dichotomize every part of life, the traditional dualistic views of discourse and reality, and culture and nature, for example. Following this idea, gender, for example, is currently seen as a more fluid concept, not the mere differentiation between man and woman. There are many studies about gender identity nowadays, which focus on how people's personal sense of gender and how they decide to express or represent it. In the same way, the concept of gender is being expanded so can nature and humanity. This is a very interesting point of view when understanding the ecofeminist movement and how much it has changed since its origins in the 70s.

As we have noted before, ecofeminism, as well as ecocriticism, have been dealing with retractors due to their problems when it comes to a clear definition. Douglas A. Vakoch revisits how feminist criticism and ecocriticism have always suffered when searching for a concrete definition in his introduction to *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature* (2012). Vakoch exemplifies the different views of feminist criticism within literary analysis: criticism just written by women, the criticism made by women from a feminist point of view, or criticism made by either women or men but feminist at its core. This pluralism of views makes sense when contrasted with the many branches within the feminist movement.

While this lack of concreteness has been used as an attack on feminist literary criticism, Vakoch argues that it is the reason why “feminists can continue to search even more deeply for patterns of oppression as well as connection”, and only by trusting their different perspectives they can become self-sufficient without needing validation from the outside. At the same time, ecocriticism’s analysis of the relationship between the environment and literature falls also into different points of view and ideologies, while always maintaining environmental issues as the basis of their investigation. Vakoch sees this similarity between ecocriticism and feminist theory, their plurality, and their defiance towards definition, what made it possible for the birth of a new field: feminist ecocriticism, and therefore ecofeminist literary criticism. He calls it a “hybrid discipline” that analyses the similarities between the domination of women and nature in literature, and how some literary works represent or reveal “the oppressiveness of patriarchal, dualistic thinking” (9).

An important and somewhat new term in both poststructuralism and ecofeminist literary criticism is “posthuman”, Louise Westling writes about it in her article “Literature, the environment, and the question of the posthuman”. According to her, this term is the key to overcoming anthropocentrism in literary criticism. For this we need to step outside our perspective, she states that “*anthropos* has never been the stable entity that our culture has assumed for the past several hundred years” (Gersdorf, Catrin, and Sylvia Mayer 25) for these boundaries between human and nonhuman to be blurred out Westling says that posthuman theorists focus on “the deep ecological relationships between the cultures of *homo sapiens* and the larger community of life on the planet”.

Ecocriticism has been criticized, as stated before, for its essentialism and the sexist notion of women being biologically connected to nature, Westling analyses the problematic similarities between the patriarchal view of power over women and nature with the humanistic hegemony over the nonhuman, like animals or plants. She sees a need for “a radical reevaluation of the concept of the human and the meaning of literary culture, in its relationship with the so-called ‘natural’ world of which it is a part” (28) Westling goes on by questioning Derrida’s ideas on how the power of denomination makes a human *human*, as a divine power over the rest of the living creatures. The concept of posthuman can be useful when analyzing a literary text, by positioning humans and other agents of nature such as plants or animals at the same level we can understand better the domination over women by male hegemony. These notions can broaden the way we interpret other beings in literary texts, where representations of the natural world can be seen as not simply scenery or decoration, but as equal parts of the novel as the human protagonists.

Ecofeminism is not simply a mere conjugation between ecology and feminism, it reviews the way humans structure their way of living. Our education, political views, social class, and religious beliefs, all shape our behavior, not just between humans but in relation to our surroundings, our environment. The sexist tendency of normalizing the mistreatment and devaluation of females and the natural world exists because we live in a patriarchal world where hegemony is in the hands of men, mainly white and rich. Abuse is mostly done when there is a benefit to be obtained, and the longer it is normalized the harder it is for the abused to realize it is unfair and to fight against it. Therefore, for those who gain from being dominant having laws, religious tenets, and social acceptance is key to maintaining their power.

In my opinion, ecofeminism is far from disappearing when taking into consideration the current situation of humanity. Even though the importance of feminism and environmentalism have been supported and proven for over a century, women and the environment are still at risk. According to a report made by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “The July 2022 land and ocean-surface temperature for the globe was 1.57 degrees F (0.87 of a degree C) above the 20th-century average of 60.4 degrees F (15.8 degrees C)” (Bateman). This increase in temperature has worsened the sea ice coverage level in the Antarctic Sea and increased the number of hurricane storms in the Eastern Pacific region. The higher temperatures have made life conditions on earth worse for humans and animals. On the other hand, women’s rights have also suffered in 2022, as Amnesty International reports, since the COVID-19 pandemic “Domestic violence has increased, job insecurity for women has worsened, access to sexual and reproductive health services has been eroded, girls’ enrollment in schools has reduced dramatically in many places.” (Callamard) The Taliban seizing of Afghanistan in 2021 has restricted women’s rights across the nation, they have been prohibited from returning to their work, traveling without a male companion, or continuing education after turning twelve, to name a few. In Ethiopia, sexual violence acts, such as rape or mutilation, committed by military men have tragically increased. Turkey has withdrawn from the landmark Istanbul Convention which fights against gender-based violence. Lastly, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has resulted in the criminalization of abortion in many states.

It is obvious that the worldwide decay of the state of the environment and women are connected. We live in a world that has normalized the mistreatment of women and the environment. Therefore, I believe an ecofeminist perspective is needed not just in literature but in life. I understand that this outlook may be upsetting because it involves everybody,

even women, to look at our own actions towards our surroundings. To accept that the way we treat the environment, the land, the sea, and animals, is connected to sexism, is a wake-up call for all of us. Furthermore, to improve the current situation it has to be understood that ecological catastrophes and sexist behaviors are rooted in the way humans organize their lives, politics and religion are two great power who have huge control over people's views and behaviors. As someone who was raised in a rural village in Asturias, and who now lives in a big city, rereading Joyce Carol Oates' novel *With Shuddering Fall* from an ecofeminist point of view has helped me understand better the tumultuous story of Karen, the protagonist, as well as other writings of the same author.

3. Joyce Carol Oates: Her Debut Novel and Ecofeminism

The literary work analyzed within the ecofeminist perspective in this final dissertation is the 1964 novel *With Shuddering Fall*, written by American author Joyce Carol Oates and published when she was 28. Since then, Oates' literary career has been unstoppable: more than sixty novels and collections of short stories, a saga of gothic literature, a collection about social class struggles in America known as the Wonderland Quartet Series, almost twenty nonfiction books, two plays, and even some picture books. It seems like Oates has always enjoyed being occupied, according to her mother "she was always busy with this or that project. She drew when she was very young, and as she grew older, she wrote all the time. And if something gave her trouble she just kept going – she wouldn't quit" (Johnson 166). Unsurprisingly, she has ended up becoming one of the most prolific writers in American history.

With Shuddering Fall was her first published novel but it was not her literary beginning. A year prior Oates had written a collection of short stories called *By the North Gate*, and she had already won an award while an undergraduate at Syracuse University (from which she graduated as valedictorian) for her short story "In the Old World". Her productivity has been welcomed with various accolades: the *National Book Award* for *them* (1970), the *Bram Stoker Award* for *Zombie* (1996), *The Corn Maiden and Other Nightmares* (2011), and *Black Dahlia and White Rose: Stories* (2012), the *Folden Plate Award* for American Academy of Achievement (1997), the *Prix Femina Etranger* for *The Falls* (2005), the *Chicago Tribune Literary Prize* (2006), the *Humanist of the Year* award by American Humanist Association (2007), the *World Fantasy Award* for Best Short Fiction for "Fossil-Figures" (2011), and the *Jerusalem Prize* for a Lifetime Achievement (2019), to name a few.

Oates has also been a finalist for the *Pulitzer Prize* for Fiction on five occasions: twice for her short stories collections, in 1970 for *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*, and 2015 for *Lovely, Dark, Deep: Stories*; and three times for her novels, in 1993 for *Black Water*, in 1995 for *What I Lived For*, and in 2001 for *Blonde*, a semifictional biography of Marilyn Monroe which has been adapted into a movie by Netflix and is set to premiere in September 2022.

With such an immense literary production it is no surprise that Oates has dealt with a great variety of subjects: crime, love, family ties, violence, feminism, racism, sexism, homophobia, abortion, American culture, etc. All these themes have been present in Oates' writing from the beginning, one could argue that *With Shuddering Fall* serves as an introduction to her multiple oncoming style and motifs. Oates, who "has refused to adjust herself to any literary school or aesthetic category" (Araújo 93) as she finds "different genres are opportunities for experimental fiction" (98), is known for a common feature: her female protagonists who "are bullied, assaulted, beaten, psychologically abused, and often raped" (Johnson 172).

In this essay, I will analyze Oates' debut novel from an ecofeminist perspective, which could be done with many of her later works. After publishing *With Shuddering Fall* Joyce Carol Oates started a book series known as "Wonderland Quartet", where she revisits farming families and its correlation with human relationships, years later in *The Falls* (2004) the wilderness of Niagara Falls is described as a natural force that humans cannot fight while exposing the Love Canal environmental catastrophe. Other works also use nature as a metaphor for her character's situations, for example in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) cemeteries are seen as a common ground between humans and the natural world, a place where we all become one with nature; in *Mudwoman* (2012) the protagonist's self-awareness is completely bound with her mother's abandonment on a river, turning her into a creature which cannot be comprehended as just human.

It is interesting to mention a letter to The New York Times Book Review in 1972 where Oates answers a review made by Roger Sale (in which he criticizes her for her productivity), she mentions how competitiveness is a great problem for America's society, where people fail to acknowledge we are all living in a "communal consciousness". She wishes that someday "all this wasteful worrying about who owns what, who owns whom, who "owns" a portion of art, will be finished and we will have again a truly communal art to which artists contribute anonymously." She praises the message in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" on humanity and his idea of the poet's role as someone who transfigures and clarifies the world that surrounds us. Oates finishes her letter by lamenting the tendency of her books'

reviews to start by mentioning her productivity, “in the usual consumer terms”. Siegfried Erich Kraus sees this competitive neurosis that Oates complains about as a reproduction of one of the main ideas behind the foundation of America: “the singular pioneer forging his way through the wilderness, seeking the pure community, sweeping away the unfaithful, clearing the land and his mind of time, history, and other people” (39). According to Kraus, Americans link individualism and therefore singularity, with accomplishing success.

From an ecofeminist perspective, individualism is a privilege since only someone who is perceived as a whole individual can freely live as a singular person. One of the main fights within feminism has been for women to be treated as autonomous people. Kraus is right to link the foundation of the United States with individuality, but the rights of freedom and autonomy were only granted to white men, while “entire categories of human beings were *de facto* excluded” (Mies et al. 223). Oates sees competition as a path toward humanity’s failure, and ecofeminism sees it as an unfair competition where we are all forced to participate. According to Maria Mies, the concept of self-determination must be reconsidered when analyzing ecofeminist theory. Mies explains that “self-determination of the social individual, the subject, was – and is – based on the definition of the ‘Other’, the definition as object, of other human beings.” She goes on by stating that “autonomy of the subject is based on heteronomy (being determined by others) of some Other (nature, other human beings, ‘lower’ parts of the self)” (223).

Oates’ commentary on society’s failure to participate in a communal consciousness goes hand in hand with Mies’ ideas on human’s incapability to self-determine without undermining others. This conflict of community versus the self is a common theme in Oates’ literary work, according to Kraus in her stories “Americans are always in motion, colliding, pursuing, running from each other, hiding, seeking privacy, then trying to find something to fill that secret place again” (40) this may be the reason why Oates tends to go back to the United States’ darkest times, such as the Depression or World War II.

Now that I have already established ecofeminist theory, the author, and the literary work that is going to be analyzed in this final dissertation, I can continue with the analysis of the novel, where the concept of self-determination and ecofeminism will be studied in more detail in relation with the novel *With Shuddering Fall*.

4. Ecofeminist Analysis of *With Shuddering Fall*

4.1 Spring, Summer, and Fall

With Shuddering Fall twenty-three chapters are divided into three parts: spring, summer, and fall, which serve as a narrative feature since they are the novel's beginning, middle, and end. It should be noted that seasonal change is an unstoppable force of nature that differs depending on the place on earth. However, mankind's activities, mainly pollution and deforestation, throughout history have impacted the characteristics of seasons. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the common events or processes that correspond to the different seasons are known as seasonality, and it is an important point of view when analyzing climate change.

As stated in a 2021 EPA report, "climate change is driving longer-term changes in seasonality and fundamentally altering the ways in which humans and natural systems experience and interact with seasonal events". Global warming has made winters warmer, which has resulted in an alteration in precipitation from snow to rain in many locations, the change in migrations and reproduction of many species, an increase in pest outbreaks, and the alarming rise of extreme seasonal events such as heat waves or wildfires. In this section, I will analyze the reason for Oates' use of seasonality as chapter dividers and how they help understand the story's progress within the novel, as observed by Rose Marie Burwell in her essay about Oates' first novel, "the structure of the tripartite novel originates in the psychic condition of Karen before, during and after her moral maturation".

Early spring sets the beginning of the novel in the fictional rural Eden County, which would later be used as a location for many of Oates' stories, and "reveals Karen in a quiescent, but restless, moral state" (Burwell 54). From the first page, we understand that Karen is going through a period of change from childhood to adulthood. Karen is concerned with growing up and the concept of death, and she finds herself as a codependent being who needs a male figure to live, either her father or a love interest. Spring ends with Karen being unwillingly driven to Shar and escaping with him after he tries to rape her and almost kills her father in a fight. Summer showcases the novel's middle part, the climax of Karen's choice. Through Karen and other secondary characters, we visit two fictional cities, Synderdale and Cherry River, where major car races occur. Sunny and hot summer days exhaust the characters while they are surrounded by festive celebrations and big crowds who are attracted by the fast cars and the possibility of disaster. The uproar that circles the races

ends up in a race-related riot after Shar crashes on purpose, bringing Karen to a psychotic episode. The novel's final chapters take place in the fall, and they establish the outcome of Karen's journey, she is discharged from a mental hospital and taken back to her father's farmhouse where she tries to reconcile with her past.

The fact that seasonal changes are so interwoven with Karen's mind and body may be a representation that she has closer contact with nature than the rest of the characters. As I will point out within this analysis, Karen is usually the one that showcases a critical eye when observing her surroundings, such as the violent acts perpetrated by the men around her, the absurdity of risking people's lives on races (and people cheering on it), the double standards of the doctors at the mental hospital, etc. Being a woman makes Karen a target for male abuse, the same way nature is constantly exploited and taken advantage of, and this may be the reason why she is so connected with the environment that surrounds her.

The novel's first word is 'spring', the introduction to the first chapter, however, the protagonist's rural town is still affected by winter. The third-person limited narrator of the novel sets the first chapter by stating that it is early spring, and winter has not entirely vanished yet. Karen accompanies her father to the old decrepit cabin down at the creek below their farm, where their old neighbor Rule lives. Spring is seen as a lively and unstoppable force that puts an end to the deadly and dark winter. This juxtaposition mirrors old Rule's health, the same way spring shall come so is Rule's inevitable death. Karen has trouble facing death from her youthful point of view, her teenage years are the spring of her life, but she knows winter comes to all.

On their way to the cabin, Karen witnesses the effects of spring that are already showing around the creek where "swift brown water rushed against the ice, cutting a channel through it" and "the channel grew wider, the ice was broken away an inch at a time" as "the rapids churned with uprooted bushes, propelling sticks and trunks and parts of boats before it" (Oates 4). Even if Karen has not yet entered the decaying man's house, she is already noticing death around the cabin as she stares "through the dead weeds to the water: it was alive and moving, squirming, the only real movement in this chill morning," Karen notices how fast spring had made its way through her town, as just a few days before it was all covered by snow. However, Karen seems to untraditionally link spring with death, she sees the creek's waters in motion as "lurking and sinister" (5).

From the beginning of the novel, we can start to understand Karen's obsession with death, she sees movement as deadly because she knows living only gets you closer to death. For Karen winter is a calming pause, as if it were possible to stop time. The forces of nature

within springtime are seen as a threat, and since she is being forced to help her father attend to the dying man Karen has no escape from the notion of mortality anymore. From an ecofeminist point of view, the fact that Rule's health is so deteriorated that he no longer comes out of his cabin is making nature regain control little by little of the surroundings of the building. At the same time, the creek around the house seems to show the impact of pollution even in Karen's rural area with remaining parts of boats filling the water.

The entrance to the cabin only makes matters worse for Karen's mental state. Decadence is present all over, both outside and inside the place: rusty nails, broken windows, revolting smell, and trash all around. The cabin is a physical display of Rule's condition, of death. The only instance of ease Karen can achieve inside the cabin is when she gets closer to the window, to the outside world, where she feels the cold air and sees the uncolored sky, as she reflects on how it does not look like spring. Again, winterlike features numbly calm Karen. As Burwell puts it "She senses inchoately that he is linked with an unknown destiny that awaits her apart from her existence as the pampered youngest daughter of a back country patriarch" (55) Karen is forced to be there, her father expects her to help because it is a woman's role, to serve and accommodate others, the same way he sees his farm's land and animals. He offers the soup as well as Karen as help, and she cannot fight it even if she does not want to be there.

In this first chapter, we learn about her mother's death, and that her father, Mr. Herz, has been widowed four times already. Mr. Herz does not mention the mother's name, he simply describes her as "the one with the hair like Karen's – almost pure white, hardly any color in it" (8) probably because he does not expect Rule to remember her by anything other than her physical appearance. Her father talks about her without any emotion, he does not even really remember how long she has been dead: "ten years or so ago, maybe twelve." This is another clue that helps us unravel Karen's view on death, most women in her life have died and been replaced, and now she is covering that role herself. She is therefore aware of how disposable she is. Even though Karen dares to leave the cabin without permission, she is deeply affected by the visit: "she could hardly tell the difference between the fresh air and the deathly air of Rule's cabin – it was as if the stench had permeated her and was carried with her" (12). The same way spring has interrupted the calm of winter, visiting Rule has made death a vivid reality for Karen that is no longer trapped inside the cabin, nor covered by snow. At the same time, she feels guilty for not following her father's orders.

This first chapter, and the introduction of spring, get the rest of the story in motion. Karen's uneasiness with the notion of death, and her rebellion against her father's authority are crucial to understanding how the novel builds up to what inevitably happens next. After visiting Rule, Karen goes on a double date with her sister Celine and her boyfriend, Albert, and the older boy Karen is seeing, Jack. After an awkward meeting, Karen and Jack go on a walk by themselves. She tells him about Rule, and how she ignores if his health deterioration is due to his age or the weather. Suddenly, Karen feels full of life and expresses her desire to live, love, and run away. At the same time, she observes the remains of winter:

Winters here in the northwestern hills of Eden County were long and brutal and recovery from them always seemed to Karen a miracle. In the worst days the snow looked like an incredible sifting of earth and heaven, blotting out both earth and heaven, reducing them to an insane struggle of white that struck at human faces like knives. Summers reeked with heat, and heaven pressed downward so that the sun had to glare through skies of dust. Sometimes there would be holocausts of fire in the woods, churning and twistings of white smoke rising into the white sky. The brutality of the land somehow evoked joy in Karen (Oates 23).

This extract is important to understand that Oates intentionally uses seasons to divide the story and how they internally affect Karen as well as her outside world. Karen compares two opposite forces, winter and summer, the same way she does with heaven and earth. She sees humans as powerless against nature in the same way as they are against God. Even if at first sight it seems Karen is portraying winter as something dangerous by calling it 'brutal', she once again sees it as a resting phase, capable of erasing everything, even heaven and earth. On the other hand, Karen describes summer as a hellish stage, when even heaven is pushed down, and the skies are filled with dust. Summer is the real destroyer with the burning of the woods due to heat waves and dryness. However brutal both seasons can be for humans, they shockingly bring joy to Karen. She is not delighted by the brutality towards the land but by the brutality of the land. It seems as if Karen sees seasons as proof of nature's greater power, an ongoing cycle that no human can fight against. This reasoning serves us to understand how Karen feels, on the one side she wants to make her father proud, and do as she is told, on the other side she wants to run away and live freely, although she seems unable to do it by herself. At that moment, Karen is literally and figuratively at a crossroads, she wants to leave and stay, and at that point, she decides to stop Shar's car and get in the way of Rule's son.

Considering the fact that Karen lives on a farm, owned, and managed by her father, winters are indeed brutal for agriculture. Since the fictional Eden County is supposed to be located in the northeast part of the USA, snow is a common factor in the winter season there.

Snow covers the crops, so there is a stop in production and covers the fields where cows feed. It is understandable then that Karen sees recovering from winter's harsh conditions as a miracle since her family's living depends on farming, and therefore the use of land. For farmers, spring is the best season, with warmer temperatures and pollination the harvesting of food is at its peak, and animals usually breed during this period too. At the same time, working the land is easier with those temperatures since it is not freezing nor boiling hot. Curiously, Karen finds spring unsettling, probably because it means a focus on work for her father, a work she is not considered able to do, and since both Karen and her sister are getting older, they are more of an impediment. It is understandable that Karen is having an identity crisis at this moment, as her father and his men get ready for working the land, she must decide whether to move outside of the home (which implies going with another man) or stay and taking care of his father as his wives did before her.

The day that would change Karen's life forever starts with her getting out of bed early due to the "cold and gray" (45) morning which makes her want "company as well as warmth." This is the reason why she decides to have breakfast with her father and his working men, something that she regrets once Shar arrives with the news of Rule's death. She believes that if she had withstood that early spring morning, she would have avoided everything that happens next: Shar's rape attempt, the car accident, her father's beating, and her escape with Shar along the woods, the wilderness, where winter is still present.

Summer sets the core and climax of the novel; we do not get a complete idea of what happens with Karen throughout the rest of spring as the eighth chapter is already set in mid-summer when the days become longer and the nights shorter. In this middle part of the novel, we are introduced to another two fictional cities: Synderdale and Cherry River where Shar is going to race and represent "the physical violence with which, for Oates, the self is inevitably created" (Burwell 54). While the first part of the novel starts with Karen and her father walking down the road towards Rule's cabin, this second part starts with two secondary characters: Mitchie, a black driver from Shar's team, and Ponzi, a mechanic. Summer's heat is linked to the races and fast cars, where high temperatures are an unavoidable danger added to racing. It is no coincidence that the first racing location the reader is introduced to, the fictional Synderdale – whose name can be read as a wordplay of 'sin' – is sponsored by the county firemen. All these features bring us back to Karen's description of summer. The city of Synderdale is shown as the opposite of Karen's rural Eden County: an urban place filled with people of all ages and races, where leisure time and entertainment are available.

Oates gives life to the celebrating town with movement and sounds, traffic, crowded streets, marching bands, parades, and music through speakers and instruments. Around this frenzy, tension and aggressiveness are noticed among the crowd, the kids beating the drums with their fists and then with their feet angrily, the music getting louder, stones being thrown, and people noticing Mitchie's presence and calling him "that nigger." (100) Summer heat seems to have affected the town's people and their behavior, even the poster that advertises the race showcases the same feeling with a "garish picture of a racing car and a helmeted man who seemed to be lunging out of a halo of flame" (101), which resemblances Karen's "holocausts of fire" though instead of in the woods this time is in the center of a town. Mitchie knows that fire is the only thing that worries Shar, and himself too, in such a dangerous job as racing, he even says to Ponzi that "If it could be a crash and everything over at once – that wouldn't be too bad. But the fire comes right away and keeps on. That's bad" (103). While Ponzi tries to reassure Mitchie that he should not worry about fire because he is a "big strong nigger", Mitchie only finds calm in Shar's reflection on the positive side of fire since "after you die worms and things eat you; if you was burnt away they couldn't get at you" (103). Shar sees being consumed by fire as a more decent way to die, even if it is brutal, it is fast and leaves no traces, instead of slowly decaying and being devoured. It is not surprising that Shar, who finds freedom in his career as a race driver, sees dignity in a swift death.

Fire and hell are constantly mentioned in summertime Synderdale, and the drivers seem to have morphed due to the heat of the races and the cars, they are described with "their hands all blisters and eyes burnt, cars about ready to explode or fall apart" (105). Since it is summer, rain is a scarce resource, and they complain that the circuit does not have sprinklers to settle down the dust and prevent combustions. There is no control over nature, not even in artificial ways, so racers must face the summer heat and all its disadvantages. In the summer season of the novel, water is seen as a purifying force, a brief rest from the exhaustion of the hot weather. Before driving, Shar goes to the hotel room with Karen, where they have an aggressive sexual reunion that concludes with him taking a shower in which "he thought of sweat running off his body, dirt licked free, the intense heat of the bedroom exorcized by the water. He would be free of that; he would be ready for the race" (117).

Heat affects everyone in the story, it does not matter who they are, even Max, a tycoon who sponsors Shar and who is introduced in the first race as a shadow that lures over Shar. Max is described as a man of excess, and so is his physical appearance, which makes him suffer even more than the rest under the hot sun of Synderdale, where he uncontrollably

sweats and complains to Karen by saying “Heat, this heat disintegrates me –given a high temperature, a man caught in it– what happens to God at such times? So far away – Impossible– Just like no man with a toothache can be a believer” (123). Max’s words resonate with Karen’s description of summer as a phase where heaven is buried and out of sight, it is difficult to have faith when the earth feels like hell. Summertime also has its consequences on Karen, who is having a hard time dealing with the risks Shar faces by racing while at the same time trying to avoid Max’s questioning about her possible pregnancy, all within the unbearable heat. Karen tries to shade herself from the “melting of the sky” (128), as she stares at the circuit’s tracks along the “dry green infield” where the “billboards and posters of the stadium walls, shredded by wind and rain” have been defaced with obscenities.

Karen is far from the battered cabin in Eden County and the haunting of spring, she is finally surrounded by the exhilaration of a celebrating town, nonetheless, she finds the environment menacing. She thinks of racing as an abomination, a needless approximation to death, and the heat only makes it more dangerous. While she worries about Shar she thinks about how “a gust of wind would pick up dust and blow it hotly against the faces of the men –they would blink against the pain, a tribute to their mortality” (129) as if she expects nature to bring the sense back to the drivers’ minds, to remind them that they have no power against it. Even under the boiling sun, Karen’s hands are cold like ice, it is winter still inside her as she feels trapped and unable to act independently. It is in this circuit that Karen has a realization about Shar once his driving maneuvers lead another driver to crash and burn to death. She stares still as “masses of flame licked up against the glowing concrete. Across the track fuel ran to the infield grass, already burning; clouds of dark smoke had begun to rise.” While everyone seemed to worry about how summer temperatures and the lack of rain would cause a blaze, it is the action of a man which results in the deadly fire. Only then does she understand that “Shar is a killer” (137) and how compromised her safety is. Karen knows that it was no accident and the scope of the human threat, unlike Max, she is not worried about the impact of summer weather, she fears the people around her who force a destructive fire and who clap afterward. They have achieved what they came to the race for, entertainment.

Another feature related to summer that is present in this part of the novel is Max's constant ingestion of fruits. Chapter eleven starts with Max eating “melons luxuriously” (139) while being served by a young boy; he eats in a grotesque and sloppy manner, spilling the fruit juice all over him and the table as he celebrates Shar’s deadly victory “in a scene infused with perverse sexuality” (Burwell 58). The next morning, he is eating half a

grapefruit, covered with sugar to fight its sourness, the same way he tries to cheerfully discuss Shar's abandonment while ruthlessly discussing with Karen how he expects her to undergo an abortion to get rid of her entirely. He sees the fruit as a means to improving his health, like an elixir, "he understood fruit was good for a man in his condition" (181) and summer is the season of fruit.

Cherry River is the second city shown in the novel's summer, a rundown coastal southern location that "had been mobbed righteously by both sides" (193) after the Civil War. Cherry River, in comparison to Synderdale, has the benefit of being located along the coast, and the northern winds, which result in quite a mild climate throughout summer. Water is seen again as a pacifying force, in this case lowering the temperatures so humans can live more easily. Cherry River is shown as a neutral space from the beginning: the weather, their historical view of the Civil War as a "War Between the States" (195), and its lack of connection to its past as an 18th-century English harbor to the modern gambling city that it turned into. It is probably due to its pleasant summer and ocean access that Cherry River has turned into a city where rich families have bought big states and entertainment such as racing, casinos, and nightclubs have massively grown. The city's expanding development has brought people from all over the globe, resulting in a "vividly mixed" population. The racist comments present in Synderdale's race are considered in more detail in Cherry River, where violence between white and black people has noticeably increased and we learn about Shar's major competition, a black racer called Vanilla Jones. The city's race is programmed as part of the celebration of the 4th of July, bringing even more people to the already crowded Cherry River.

It is in Cherry River that Shar tries to escape from his history with Karen and focus on his main passion, racing. Water is again used as a purifying force, this time Shar uses it by swimming on the beach every morning, even if it is described as contaminated "littered with papers and refuse" (197) it still works for him, "the staleness of his mind was freshened by the water and air; he felt young [...] before him there was nothing but water and light" (199). The water seems to be the only place where Shar is portrayed as optimistic toward life, even shouting to Mitchie "God how I love this world! [...] A damn good world! I can't get close enough to it". It is then that Shar realizes something important to understand his behavior throughout the novel: "He stared at the skyline and the hot sun. with the coarse water lunging about him he thought again that he could not get close enough to it, just as he could not get close enough to anything, finally –not even his racing, certainly not Karen" (197). Shar feels disconnected from everything and everyone that surrounds him, this may

be the reason behind him risking his life in races, it is the only thing that he is good at, for what he is finally rewarded, and he is not afraid of dying because he has nothing to lose due to his lack of connections. This is also the reason why he hates Karen so much; she forces him to connect, makes escaping difficult, and he loathes the feeling.

Max's power is shown more clearly in Cherry River since we find out he owns a luxurious motel in the city, described as an enormous building made of tinted glass which also serves as a nightclub where partying and gambling occur. Max is proud of his conquering of the land by owning the building, evidence of this is the fake cascade located in the lounge and his own words: "outside the sun would get in your eyes. There would be mosquitoes or ticks or snakes – bears, anything. [...]. But in here [...] there is no trouble – it is all under control. That is what civilization brings to us. I could exist nowhere but in civilization" (204). He owns the place and the people in it, because of his influence he can offer a young woman as some type of pacifier for Shar after he assaults another girl, "to show concern for Shar" (234). No matter Max's power, he cannot avoid Shar and Karen's reunion, unable to control their paths their unfortunate fate is impossible to stop even for him.

The same way water is present in both Synderdale and Cherry River, so is fire, a juxtapose force. When Shar and Karen reunite he fantasizes about a dream he had where he burnt everything and everyone around him with a gigantic torch, the same way he did back in Spring with his father's corpse and the cabin. In what seems like an ominous premonition, he burns "all civilization down, all faces, eyes, upraised hands, souls of babies waiting to grow into womanhood and devour him" (251). It is later revealed that Karen suffers a miscarriage during this encounter, making Shar's dream somewhat come true. His burning fantasy also goes back to Karen's thoughts on winter and summer early on when he thinks about how his massive act of ignition "would have flared up all careful piles of junk, blended them in a single holocaust of flame. Burn down everything! Fire everything, as the Herzes fired their fields each year, preparing for new growth." Shar and Karen finally seem to come together on an idea, fire being something positive that forces reincarnation. However, the holocaust fire that Karen thinks about is not man-made. Once Shar realizes that there is nothing that can make him start again, erase his violent actions, no way of mending his toxic relationship with Karen, he does not want to continue living. It is then that Shar decides that instead of that 4th of July race being a failure against Vanilla Jones, he is better off by crashing. Ironically, Shar's intention of stopping violence and anger ends up causing a riot

between whites and blacks, which leads up to fights, destruction, and fire. This way summer ends in the novel.

Fall time marks the denouement of the novel when Karen is about to be discharged from a mental hospital in the town of Craig, established in an old convent that was once owned by the widow of a railroad millionaire, a magnificent ancient building deteriorated by time and lack of attention. Once the state bought the mansion to reform it into a hospital it suffered changes on its exterior, the statues of saints were removed, the gardens turned into an uneven park filled with benches for the patients, the towers were demolished, and a wire fence was lifted between the building and the road for the peace of mind of the neighbors. Karen is portrayed in an unrecognizable light this time, she has lost weight, makes up facts about herself, and seems too concerned with her physical appearance and being liked by others. Celine, her sister, finds it difficult to recognize her as well. The doctor, who did not know Karen before “the trouble” (303) as Celine refers to it, believes Karen has been “self-cured” (307). However, it is difficult to believe his medical evaluation once it is known that he has been deceived about what happened to her before arriving at the hospital, it seems like he does not know about Shar’s death being a suicide and believes the miscarriage was due to shock for his death. There is little to no hope of healing in the hospital, the psychiatrists which make expensive visits spend their time playing and drinking, they believe mental diseases cannot be fixed “the only cure is death” (307).

Snow is approaching the town, the sky is grey, and the roads toward Karen’s family home are frozen. Since it is the end of fall, the scenery that Karen observes from Albert’s car looks more like winter with the frozen river, and the naked trees. Karen finds the landscape as uncanny as her, “impossible that she could return to it as herself, see it as she had once seen it –for in spite of what she had endured, this land had not changed, even to her vision” (311). Even though Karen is shown as being detached with reality she understands she is no longer the girl who escaped the town, and therefore she cannot pretend nothing has happened or continue with her previous life before Shar. Once they drive past the bridge where she caused Shar’s car to drop while he was trying to rape her, she notices that “The car was gone; grass had recovered, grown up straight again and now frozen with the cold, as if nothing had ever happened” (312). The land has healed from that incident unlike Karen, it has recovered and shows no proof of such a horrific experience which is forever printed in Karen’s mind.

Karen finds it hard to understand that the land has silenced her ordeals, early winter makes it easy to visualize most of the land surrounding her father's house thanks to the bare trees. "Was it a betrayal?" (313) Karen asks herself while watching her family's gravestones in the distance and being shocked by the "unreality of the ground" around her, "No ground is holy, no land divine, but that we make it so by an exhausting, a deadly straining of our hearts." The land remains the same, only the changing seasons are exhibited. Karen realizes that once someone is gone the land continues its natural course, only the man-made tombstones tell the stories of those who inhabited the place. Therefore, by returning to Eden County "Karen enters again the morally somnolent world where the cycles of nature and the liturgical calendar inure one to unquestioning acceptance of the moral absolutes they symbolize" (Burwell 64).

In the final pages of the novel, while at mass with her family, Karen has an internal monologue that leads to a self-realization about her role, her state of mind, and her relationship with her father, which will be analyzed further later in this essay. After they leave the church, her father tells her that he forgives her and that he loves her, unbeknown to her inner thoughts and what actually happened to her those months away. As Karen looks at the snow "white and cold and innocent, like the disorder of her brain" she reciprocates his love and goes toward the rest of her family, "leaving ambiguous, but achievable, a consolidation of the moral independence to which Karen aspires" (Burwell 54).

It makes sense that the novel ends with Karen feeling calm while observing the arrival of winter, the season which seems to make her interior feel in harmony with the outside. "Karen's final evaluation of her circumstances can be seen in the reordering of her vision of nature of Eden County" (Burwell 65). Winter is no longer described as brutal, her "changed perceptions of the weather," as Burwell explains, are a representation of her "determination to retain clarity of mind." It is also worth mentioning that the first part of the novel portrays the change of season between winter and spring, and it ends with the transition between fall and winter. Both the beginning and the end are liminal spaces that showcase Karen's inner changes. It is only the novel's middle part that depicts a clear season, summer is not diluted, and there is no way for the characters to hide from its burning sun and clear sky.

4.2 Religion

I) Ecofeminist theology

In this section, I will analyze the correlation between ecofeminism and religion, since Christian beliefs and practices are present in the novel. Whilst ecofeminism, as explained before, deals with the consequences of the sexist domination of both women and nature, ecofeminist theology focuses on how religious beliefs have shaped and given power to the patriarchal society we live in nowadays.

Even though ecofeminist theology analyzes different religions and beliefs, in this essay I will focus on Christianity, as it is the religion present in *With Shuddering Fall*. There is no doubt about the important role Judaism and Christianity have played in the development of Euro-western culture, however, it is more complicated when trying to explain the level of implication in the domination of women and the natural world. As extensively explained in Heather Eaton's *Introducing Ecofeminist Theologies*, Christianity can be understood as its history and official texts and tenets or how its faith is experienced by its believers, for example. Christianity's roots are related to Judaism, Greek philosophy, and Western history, and its development has affected different historical times and cultures. Simply put, "Christianity is really an amalgamation of many influences and represents an endless variety of subtraditions lived in an endless variety of cultural contexts" (Eaton 63). By accepting the complexity behind what Christianity is and means, it is easier to understand how difficult it is to assess the level of responsibility it has about the subjugation of women and the natural world.

As explained by Eaton, Christianity has been a liberating movement, giving voice to those in need of freedom or justice, while also "in bed with the dominant and destructive powers of the day" (Eaton 63). There are plenty of religious texts which try to describe women as inferiors and give instructions about their proper behavior, usually with a constraining point of view, and at the same time, there is also a counter-tradition of fighting against the subjugation or downgrading of women with biblical references, for example. However, it is undeniable that women in Christianity usually fell into two categories, they were either "romanticized and sentimentalized for their virtues" or "vilified for their moral weakness" (Eaton 64). In biblical words, women can be described as either Eve or Mary. In the bible, women are usually depicted as men's property, who can be given away as dowry

and/or concubines. There are many episodes of rape in the Bible, however, rape is understood differently in the religious text. In the Hebrew bible, rape happens not when a woman is forced into sexual intercourse, but when a man “violates the man who holds the rights to a woman’s sexuality, typically her father or her husband” (Gravett 280). At the same time, there are also stories of brave women who represent liberation for women, such as it is the case of Deborah (the only female prophet and judge), or the liberator Queen Esther, to name a few. Even Jesus’s teachings have been recognized as “less patriarchal than his peers and culture” (Eaton 65).

In relation to women and the natural world, Christianity has traditionally connected men with the spiritual world, while women were considered bodily. Men were made in God’s image while women were intrinsic to nature. Even if God is beyond gender, he is constantly referred to as ‘he’, and continuously depicted as a man. Because women were less human, they were considered intellectually like infants, and therefore they had to be controlled as “both nature and women had inherent chaotic forces” (Eaton 66). This explains why when Christian beliefs started to shape Europe’s laws in the Middle Ages women were legally under patriarchal domination. As explained by Eaton, prominent Christian theologians from ancient times up to the 20th century thought of nature as “chaotic and unruly” and so were women, and because of it “both had to be constrained by men” (Eaton 66). Women were underestimated for being too impassioned, intellectually less capable, spiritually ruined, and a threat to men’s righteous being.

In the same way that women have found liberation and constriction in Christianity, so has the natural world. From medieval times, there has been a tendency in Christian belief to think about God as “the great clock-maker, ordering the world” (Eaton 67). The natural world, on the other hand, “was dead, void of spirit, even corrupt.” God’s salvation was considered as a realm outside and above the natural world, and because of this men and God were superior to it. This theologian approach to Christianity considered that women and nature were there to serve both men and God, because of their inferiority. Man’s right to master the earth is part of Genesis, once God created Adam in his own image, he created Eve too and told them to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28). It is also true that some prominent Christian figures also encountered the Divine in the natural world, as it is the case of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology and animals, or Santa Teresa de Jesús, known for her contemplation of nature to get in touch with God.

The connection between Christianity and the environment is unquestionable, “as key components of every human civilization, religions are necessarily critical elements of the environmental crisis” (Gottlieb 9). The sacred texts consider earth as God’s creation for humans to live in and from, a temporal space before entering Heaven through salvation. Because of this thought, earth, and therefore the natural world, plants, and animals, are disposable, and only exist for humans to take advantage of it in order to survive. In the same way, Eve was created to give Adam company and offspring. The environmental crisis is not simply a result of human action in isolation, it “was created not just by a generalized “humanity” but by social structures determining decisive differences in power and wealth, differences mapped along lines of race and gender as well as class” (Gottlieb 13). And Christianity’s role as a religious structure that has shaped law, culture, behavior, human relationships, and hegemony throughout Western civilization’s history is undeniable.

II) Religion in the novel

The novel starts with a representation of one of Christianity’s bases, “the ethical imperatives to love our neighbors” (Gottlieb 23) when Mr. Herz forces Karen to visit Rule’s cabin and bring him food. As Mr. Herz says to Rule, “a person with proper belief like myself, [...] he don’t just let another one lay alone and die. It’s against our belief. We got to come and help” (Oates 9). The idea of the obedient daughter who takes care of those in need is very Christian indeed. Karen does not want to go with her father, but she knows there is no way to refuse his orders, as “before her father’s words all defenses vanished” (Oates 3), and so she warms up a canning soup and obeys. Karen behaves unruly when she tells her father she wants to go home, and he reprimands her and dismisses her perception of time as a fog she could walk through when it is something that runs away from her. This takes us back to the idea of women being more connected to nature and difficult to educate while men are made according to the image of God, the great clockmaker. By escaping from the cabin Karen defies her father’s orders and becomes more autonomous. However, she is filled with guilt after the incident and desperately tries to gain her father’s forgiveness.

The novel’s third chapter starts after Sunday’s church, with Karen feeling haunted by the choir’s voices and the image of the priest holding the Sacrest host. Her connection with communion is so great that when she arrives home, she goes to her room and kneels. It is obvious that religion has a great impact on Karen’s life, and it is also part of her relationship with her father. Karen remembers how her sister was told to leave the room by

her father for mocking her after almost fainting at her first communion, hinting that she had done it to show off. Mr. Herz seems to understand that Karen's dizziness is proof of faith's power over her, which makes him proud. This is important because Karen, throughout the novel, tries very hard to be part of her family and to be accepted by her father. She is constantly feeling isolated, she looks different than her relatives being the only one with blonde hair and blue eyes, and she seems to behave oddly differently too. The fact that she is the youngest one, the closest in age to her is Celine and she is almost ten years older, also divides her from the rest. Faith is a common ground for Karen and her father and because of it, she cherishes it deeply.

There is no doubt about the subjugation of Karen within religion, at church she describes being part of the mass, kneeling beside her father, with the following words, "She forced everything away until she felt alone, small, an absurd figure braced against collapse by the strength of the prayer alone" (Oates 30). After church, while continuing her prayer privately in her room she falls into a state of ecstasy, which even makes her cry. Filled with emotions, Karen behaves friendlier and nicer with her family as if reformed by her prayers, even with her older brother Ed, someone she obviously does not have a close relationship with since she does not even remember his son's name. Her attitude makes them feel uneasy, making them wonder if she has a fever. It seems as if Karen tries to force herself to behave as is expected of her as a Christian woman, but it does not come naturally to her.

That night Mr. Herz reads an excerpt from the Bible to his two daughters, as he always had done every Sunday night to his family. Reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, on a chair by the fire, puts Karen's father in a position of authority, as the priest on the altar. Karen remembers how her mother would sit nearby while she sewed, and this is a clear example of her upbringing. Her father is the owner of the land they live in, the farmer, he represents the authority and is the one who can share the words of God. Conversely, her mother is the wife, the one who listens the same as the children, and sews, which is another traditionally female activity. The novel explains that Karen's mother was Mr. Herz's last wife, but he had more before her, he kept on renewing the figure of mother and wife, now Celine and Karen are the ones who have to continue those roles. While Celine does not seem to pay much attention to her father, Karen fights slumber and reflects on the parables by thinking "What strange dignity to fulfill one's destiny in that way — forever bound by the inhuman plot of a story, manipulated by God Himself!" (Oates 43). This can be understood as a foreshadowing of Karen's imminent fate, when her father is beaten up by Shar and asks

her to kill him, she does not return home until he is dead, unable to come back until his order is obeyed.

It is interesting to analyze the biblical passage Mr. Herz reads to his daughters, the story of Abraham and Isaac. In this Genesis tale, Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, which was a gift from God, as an offering. Abraham does not hesitate because his servitude toward God is bigger than his responsibility as a father. When Abraham is ready to slay his son, an angel appears to stop him, as he has already proven his faith. There is a sacrifice, nonetheless, as Abraham kills a ram provided by God. The story is understood as how Christians are supposed to pass tests of faith during their lifetime on earth to prove they are worthy of salvation. This level of obedience, against morality or reason, is very dangerous because it seems to prove that religion can justify any action. From an ecofeminist point of view, sacrificing a son, the only male heir of Abraham is the ultimate test of faith because it means the ending of his heritage, whereas the animal is easily sacrificed and understood as existing only for human benefit.

Karen's connection to religion seems to be interrupted when she runs away with Shar into a life of urban cities, car races, living in hotels, and constant abuse. Far from her rural life, she does not go to church while in Shar's company. However, there are some references. After the tragic race in Synderdale where Shar causes the death of another racer, he gets mad at her, and his team sends her to the hotel's room. Alone in the suite, Karen reflects on her toxic relationship and how she must endure the pain until she ends up destroying Shar, as her father told her. In her reflections, she thinks about her own reality with the following words, "Karen realized she had no existence without the greater presence of someone to acknowledge her (her father; God)" (Oates 160). It is no coincidence that the greater presences she mentions are two male figures, which she seems to see as equal.

After this, Karen falls asleep and has a nightmare of a dead child in her closet, between the summer dresses she is so proud of. The child is depicted as having a transparent chest which exposes his plastic heart and plastic red, blue, and yellow veins. The child might have a double meaning, it can represent the fetus inside her own body, which Max (the tycoon who owns Shar's racing team) is trying to get rid of, or her own self. Throughout the novel, teenager Karen is constantly treated as an adult and a child at the same time, depending on the situation. When the people around her want to take advantage of her, they tell her that she is already a woman, however, when she tries to use her voice and be independent, they diminish her by calling her a child. By being outside her home, with the

traveling racing team, buying her own adult clothes, she believes she has reached adulthood. Sadly, she has been robbed of her own teenage years and forced to behave as an adult.

Karen does not want to feel pity for the dead baby because she refuses to pity herself, this makes her remember her faith in a sour way, “She thought of the fragmentary stories of men and women in the Bible, people who must have been in another world yet who seemed to her, had always seemed to her, bizarre, wild-eyed contemporaries of her own. No pity. No mercy” (Oates 161). This seems to reflect how characters from the Bible seem to be equally fictional and real, they are part of parables and history at the same time. Mercy is an important element of Christianity, God is known for his mercy toward people, being able to forgive those who repent. She goes on to wonder, “Did she not know that the universe had contrived her life, her father had planned her birth, so that she might be here tonight in this dirty hotel room, alone, waiting?”, as a Christian, Karen believes in fate, and thinks it is her destiny to suffer, and therefore Shar has been sent to her as a test of her faith. By refusing to show mercy or forgive, Karen is having doubts about her own faith, and these doubts are showcased by the darkness inside the room, where she thinks:

How much easier to look into a darkness that meant nothing than into a darkness that was really an open, straining mouth, a vast waiting hole that claimed her! It was as if God were struggling to appear to her, no tin sunlight but in darkness. If she had ever expected to see God (and she had expected to see Him, as a child) she would have supposed Him to come in light, in fire. Not in darkness (Oates 162).

This thought can be understood as Karen finding it hard to connect with God as she used to on the farm. Her separation from her father has disengaged her from God, and because of this, she is having difficulties trying to make sense of her tragic situation. If she continues to believe in God, she becomes another character from the Bible who must endure hardship to prove her faith, however, this means that she has been put on the earth to suffer, which is a hard idea to process for someone who is a victim of sexual abuse and believes she is to blame for what is happening to her. If she decides to stop believing or refuses to silently suffer, it crashes her beliefs and the basis of her connection with her own father. Even though Christians mainly learn about their religion from the Bible’s stories, not many of them expect to go through the extreme tests of faith presented in those texts. The common modern thought of Christianity is faith as the means of happiness and light; therefore, Karen is heartbroken to find out she has to experience such violent actions towards her, and that God might be behind it.

The morning after Karen's battle with her own faith, Max tells her that Shar has abandoned her, and she escapes the hotel afraid of what Max and his men might do to her. Max represents male domination in the novel, he is powerful because he is a man with money, which allows him to have properties such as hotels with casinos and a racing team. Max has people under his power, the doctor that always goes with him because he fears illness, something which seems to be outside his realm of control, and Jerry, his bodyguard, and thug, who carries out his dirty business. In a way, Max owns Shar, and consequently Karen, because Shar's way of living depends on his money. Without Max, Shar has no car or team, and therefore he cannot compete. Since Karen has nowhere to go and is part of an abusive relationship with Shar she is under Max's control too. Even Max's physical appearance showcases his power, being described as a big bulging man. While walking around Synderdale, Karen remembers an event from her childhood, how she had asked her father for a pony after a boy from her school had arrived in one.

Lost, Karen calms down remembering her prayers asking for a pony, and looks for shelter in religion by praying again. While reciting the words "Our Father" she finds herself staring at her reflection in a shop window, "murmuring to God, evoking Christ, she was, in fact, talking only to this reflection" (Oates 190). This disgusts her and makes her realize her isolation. Her father, God, and Christ are all holy male figures, while she is a woman who "deserved to be lost". She goes to the bus station without a clear plan, and there one of Max's men gives her a used envelope with ten hundred dollars so she can afford an abortion. Ironically, the envelope shows an advert for farming equipment, a slap to Karen's roots, "her degradation was complete" (191).

Karen does not go back home, because she has an unresolved matter with Shar. At Cherry River, she manages to find Shar, who rapes her so violently that she suffers a miscarriage. Emotionally and physically destroyed, Karen refuses Shar's offering of trying to save their relationship and having a family by telling him that he makes her sick, which results in Shar committing suicide in the race. Karen knows Shar's intentions when he leaves the hotel room, and she decides to take a shower, which can be understood as a representation of baptism, which symbolizes purification. When Max interrupts her shower to tell her about Shar's accident she confronts him by telling him the truth. This results in Max, who throughout the novel is hinted to be attracted to Shar and obsessed with him, losing control, and angrily blaming her for the deaths of both Shar and the baby, he yells at her "The fruit of your love is blood, the fruit of your womb —blood!" (Oates 283). Even though it is Max's fault that Shar takes part in the dangers of races, an activity which has greatly damaged him

physically and in which he ends up dying, and it is also Max who has tried to force Karen into abortion, he does not feel responsible for anything and does not hesitate to blame Karen, who as a woman is the source of all evil.

The racial riot that originates from Shar's death results in Karen wandering around the streets still wet and wearing only a white robe, which reminisces an image of the Bible's Revelations where martyrs enter Heaven wearing this kind of garment as a symbol of their purity and is also what Jesus wears when he resurrects. It could be understood as Oates hinting at Karen's innocence and her having a second chance after Shar's death. She asks out loud for God's forgiveness in the middle of the chaos. The riot itself seems to represent hell, an apocalyptic vision where people are giving up on their morals, destroying and burning properties, and being violent toward other people. This incident represents how damaging humans can be in an extreme form, not only to the natural world, animals, and women but to other men as well. Racism is a big part of the novel, a problem in the background of the story which culminates in the final moments at Cherry River, hate which goes against Christianity's belief that everybody is equal, and we are all God's offspring. It could be said that this episode is a contrast to the Western idea of human activity being the same as civilization. A big part of male domination of the natural world and women is based on the idea that men are responsible for building civilization, which behaves according to a set of rules, however, the novel proves how ephemeral civilization is.

The last part of the novel, marked by fall, starts with Karen being interned in a mental hospital that was first a convent, filled with statues of saints, and then the home of a wealthy widow. The building's history matches Karen's, who starts the novel thinking she will never marry, like a nun, and ends up being a widow of some sort after Shar's death. Karen arrives at the mental hospital completely broken due to all the abuse and trauma she has gone through, it does not help that her doctors do not fully know what has happened to her, therefore she is wrongly diagnosed and treated. In the beginning, Karen seems to be out of control, offering herself sexually to the male patients and attendants, but she seems to get better after she starts going to church. Karen reconnects with her faith by attending mass, she tells Celine at one of her visits, "The doctor will tell you about that. Being allowed to come down here for church has made a difference to me" (Oates 306). The novel never gives a clear explanation of Karen's diagnosis or treatment, only church and reading are mentioned. It looks as if her doctors do not believe she can be mentally cured and only by redirecting her behavior she can be part of society again. It is obvious that Karen does not feel good, she still cannot look at her reflection without feeling guilty, "as if she had

encountered someone she did not want to meet". The college boy whom she befriends at the hospital and her company at church realizes that and tells her "I know how you feel, that you're not worthy. But it's wrong to feel that way. I was taught that —it was a heresy in the Church, actually. It's wrong to feel that way" (308). Even though he acknowledges Karen's inner state better than her own doctors, his words only deepen Karen's feeling of guilt, it is not because she is indeed worthy that she should not feel that way, but because it is considered heresy by Christianity. Karen is blamed again for her own feelings.

Celine takes Karen back home to a place that has not changed but which cannot be the same for her ever again after everything that has happened. The farm is no longer a safe place for her, somewhere to be protected by her father. Now, she fears facing her father, who has not replied to any of her letters and who suffered a stroke after his violent encounter with Shar. Karen begs Celine to tell her everything that has happened to her family as if by knowing about them she can get attached to them, while her father avoids her. Karen tells her sister and her now husband Albert that she plans to go back to school, and by communicating with them and voicing her plans she starts feeling better, "claiming her humanity" (317). The novel's final chapters circle around the idea of Karen's redemption being a way for her to retrieve her humanity because Karen has been used and damaged by other people so much, she has lost her own consciousness as a human being. It is on the third day after Karen's return that her father appears to have dinner with her, it is no coincidence that it takes him as long as it took Jesus to resurrect. After eating, Karen takes her father to his chair beside the fire, where he used to read her from the Bible, regaining both their positions in the power dynamic father-daughter.

The novel's last chapter is set on a Sunday morning in church, with Karen surrounded by her father, sister, and brothers' families. It seems no coincidence that their surname, Herz, sounds like 'herd', which they are supposed to be, a family, a community that follows their father's word. Karen is not alone around her neighbors' staring eyes, and she enters the church with her father on her side. The building is decorated with fir branches to symbolize the coming of Christmas, and the smell of incense fills the air. For the first time, with the music of the choir and the Latin verses pronounced by the priest, Karen feels at home. The priest is described wearing a purple vestment, which symbolizes penance and expiation, a reflection of Karen's feelings. Karen sees in the mass a way of erasing all pasts, which implies the death of her own individuality as it is also necessary for the congregation to become one, "She saw the long torturous nights and the days filled with self-pity and guilt sucked away, absolved of their reality" (Oates 324) It is then that Karen feels loved by her

neighbors, not judged because she “had suffered to prove to them the justice of the universe” (325). With this belief Karen finally accepts her role as one of the Bible’s characters, a martyr for her community, someone “who had strengthened their faith in the vague beliefs they mouthed and heard mouthed to them in the ceremony of the Mass.” It is because of her “sin and penance and expiation” that not only her community but her father would love her again.

Karen tries to grasp that idea, but surprisingly, she loses concentration while the priest is preparing the communion and starts to think about her violent experiences and how they have shaped her. She imagines going to the priest and whispering to his ear “I will not give in to it. I know who I am. I have always known who I am” (Oates 327), and considers continuing with what she has become after all the abuse. She feels capable of seducing Albert and destroying her sister’s marriage, “feeding on” the farm’s men, and hurrying her father to death, something she believes he deserves because “he is a cruel, ignorant old man who has always disguised himself with strength.” Siegfried Kraus explains this dualistic point of view in Karen as a representation of her inner fight between wanting to be part of her community and her need to be an individual, “A part of her mind wants to unleash itself to the chaos she knows she can cause in society” (Kraus 43). From an ecofeminist theology point of view, Karen has been raised as a Catholic, a belief which is based on the importance of being part of a congregation, of a community, where everybody helps their neighbor. Usually, these communities are led by men, and women are supposed to take care of everybody as mothers and daughters. Accepting this role has made Karen the victim of abuse, the martyr of her congregation, and she wants to break free from it and become an independent human being, however, she only finds destructive ways to become an individual.

This takes us back to the Christian distinction of women between Eve and Mary, Eve being the independent woman who is blamed for her sexuality and corruption of men, and Mary is the communal innocent virgin who gives birth to Jesus, the savior of humanity. Karen even questions, “if Christ were not God, but only Christ, only a man, is His suffering any less?” (Oates 328), does it make her abuse less of a sacrifice if she is not holy? She believes it is even greater because she does not get to live again. At the end of the mass, Mr. Herz tells Karen that he forgives her for everything she has done, which reinforces the idea that she is to blame for the abuse carried out upon her. The novel ends with her family opening the car and taking her back into the herd. It seems as if there is no place for Karen’s independence, or at least not a healthy one for now. She has been the victim of a male

dominant Christian world, where women are blamed for their sole existence, where having an opinion is considered anarchy for women, and abuse is excused to men and blamed on women.

4.3 Farming and Racing

There are two jobs mainly depicted in the novel, farming, and racing, which are commonly related to the male world. In this section, I will analyze how Karen's father's work as a farmer and Shar's job as a racer can be seen as another representation of male control over nature. I shall start with an analysis of the story of farming in the United States and its connection to masculinity.

I) Farming as the means of control over land

The birth of the United States of America has had a deep connection with agriculture since colonial times. Moving to the new continent meant religious freedom and a new opportunity to improve their living conditions for many Europeans, however, it was not easy. In *Wild Politics*, Susan Hawthorne reflects on the connection between agriculture and the colonization of America, for her, farming was a social connector in the birth of New England. Those who colonized had, at first, a communal relationship with the land, even if taken from others, they worked over a shared piece of land similarly to Europe's earlier times. However, colonization was based on the ownership of land by Europe, it was either taken for the Crown or declared unowned so it could be appropriated. Once it was owned, it was farmed to obtain supplies for the colonizers. In this aspect, farming was primordial in the world's domination by Europe.

As time went by, the colonies grew, and the land was divided between families. As explained in *A History of American People*, most of the colonial landowners only had acreage for one farm, which made it impossible to divide between their offspring. Due to this, male farmers had to work on rented lands until reaching their mid-thirties, it was common for them to learn other skills, such as forging or carpentry, to gain extra money. Rural women helped by selling what they could manufacture at their homes, like knitted garments, cooked food, dairy products, etc. Despite their economic contribution, women's only (if possible) decision was choosing a husband, which meant losing control over her

dowry. The only women allowed to run an estate were widows, who hired male laborers to work their land.

The growth of European settlements meant a crucial change in North America's landscape and environment. In her book, Susan Hawthorne reflects on the concepts of wilderness, land, and forests, and their relation to human activities, such as farming. In the fourth chapter Hawthorne talks about the problematic view of individual ownership of land in Western civilizations compared to collective in indigenous cultures. Following this idea, she declares "that Western culture needs to shift its perception of land as something useful and profitable, to the view that the land is a living entity with which one has a relationship, and for which we are all responsible and from which we all benefit" (162). For Hawthorne, farming usually marks the difference between wilderness and workable land.

Deforestation was a major contributor to the expansion of settlers in America, who were desperate for more land. Even if wood was necessary for building and for heating, the fast clearing of forests had consequences on the environment, as it "removed protection from winds and sun, producing warmer summers and harsher winters and, ironically, reinforcing the demand for firewood" (Boyer et al., 67). Deforestation also contributed to the increase of floodings due to the change of direction of stream waters, while at the same time causing the soil to dry and harden in other parts. Settlers had more land, but it was more difficult to maintain it.

Hawthorne sees the separation between wilderness and humanity in Western civilizations as problematic. According to her, the idea that wilderness can only exist without human contact represents "how non-human players in the world are separated out from humanity" (164). This disconnection makes anthropocentrism stronger as it depicts nature as something to be dominated by humans, while "the continued relationship between people and land is what creates the possibility of long-term sustainability" (165). Hawthorne criticizes then the idea that for nature to be preserved humans need to be taken out of the equation, she goes further by describing conservationism as masculine since it "suggests that disconnection is the norm" (167).

Hawthorne sees the invention of agriculture as a change in humans' relationships with other humans and with nature. With this, "efforts to control 'nature' arise, and people begin to live on the land, rather than in it." However, she does not believe that domination is necessary for agriculture, there are sustainable ways of farming. Agriculture was forever changed by the Industrial Revolution, which was accompanied by deforestation. In that period, the Enlightenment thinkers related wilderness with the idea of savage, something

that only science could improve. For some of those thinkers, such as Henry David Thoreau, the wilderness was a romanticized space where real men could find solitude and grow. Hawthorne contrasts this with the idea of “deep ecology”, which continued Thoreau’s thinking, but still separated humans from wildlife, making humans insignificant compared to the power of wilderness. She complains about Dave Foreman’s use of the female gender in his description of the ecowarrior since it “upholds the old male-dominated order” (170). By using feminine pronouns “she is now supposed to sacrifice her life, not for family, husband, or country, but for “the million of other species” and the earth itself.”

In conclusion, a reflection on farming and the creation of the New World and Hawthorne’s analysis of the meanings behind “land” and “wilderness” are an example of how humans, and more specifically men, have historically treated nature as something to be owned and used to obtain power.

II) Farming and masculinity

J.L. Anderson’s article “*You’re a Bigger Man*”: *Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America* gives us a very interesting view of the correlation between masculinity and farming in America. The title of the article is taken from a tractor advert from 1960 which promised the buyer to become the bigger man with it. The audience of the advert were farmers which had already seen the change from animal power to machines. During World War II, Roosevelt’s Burke-Wadsworth Act (1940) exempted farm owners from being drafted into the war, since the president of the U.S.A. needed to maintain the country’s supplies. However, there was a shortage of farm workers, since laborers were not exempt, and farm machinery, as the main goal of American factories was making military machinery. Once the war was over, many of those laborers who survived moved to the cities looking for better work opportunities. Farmers relied on machines now, which lowered the amount of handwork needed to take care of the land and made the farm equipment industry grow.

According to Anderson, this new era, in which *With Shuddering Fall* is set, created two versions of farmers in America in the 1950s, the technocrat farmer and the “farmer in the business suit” (7) of the suburban middle class. Both versions carried out problematic views on farmers’ masculinity. The idea of the technocrat farmer came with the correlation between the increased use of machinery on farms and the shame of the disuse of labor work by farmers, what Anderson calls the “push-button agriculture”. The businessman farmer, on

the other hand, tried to make farming a “sophisticated endeavor” that also “de-emphasized the physicality of agriculture, merely requiring a change in garments”. Farming has always been related to men and their physical capacities. Advertisements from the period showcase the need for reinforcing masculinity in farmers with the modernization of agriculture, adverts that reflected “the human scale of the producer, even as the technology sized up”. Women are erased from these advertisements since it would only perpetuate the idea of a lack of masculinity and physical needs in farming.

From this article, we can see that the image of the farmer had been damaged by the implementation of modern technology. Farmers were known for their harsh manual labor, which required strength and endurance. The only help they had for a long time was the use of animals, but since they were taken care of by farmers they were seen as just another appendix of their power. Machines were different, trained people could function with them, even if they did not have a lot of farming experience, and so farmers’ capabilities were questioned. Since the novel is set in this period of change, it is necessary to understand the shifting view of farmers and the invisibility of rural women in the agricultural world to understand Karen’s view of her own and her aging father.

III) Farming in the novel

From the beginning of the novel, we learn that Karen lives on a farm owned by her father, whose name is never mentioned, and that she and her older sister, Celine, are the last of the kids still living at home. Since all of Karen’s brothers had already married and moved out, her father works his land with the help of hired men. There is not much mentioned in the novel about Karen’s father's work on the land, we know that he is expanding his barn, which means he is doing well, and that he has cows. Oates makes clear the man’s dedication to his work, when Karen meets with Jack, her love interest, and the cousin of Celine’s boyfriend, she makes an observation about the number of cows they have and how her father “gets up himself to make them run around at night to keep from freezing” (Oates, 14). After this brief conversation with Jack, Karen reflects on their first encounter at a church picnic when she was sixteen and him twenty-seven.

Past and present are ironically connected by the cows since Karen and her father start talking with Jack and the girl he is with while attending the cattle judging. At that moment, there is an obvious comparison between the judging of cattle and the two girls, Jack’s company is portrayed as feminine, wearing a “soft, shiny, white outfit” and a “big straw hat”

(15), whereas Karen is “dressed in shorts and an old blouse”. Even though Karen is just a teenager wearing plain clothes, she does not feel threatened by the glamorous girl and even feels confident, Oates describes Karen’s attitude at the picnic with the following words “she felt a delicious, curling sensation, as if she were seeing herself through the eyes of the girl Jack was with”. Even if Karen is not intimidated by the girl, she evidently feels the need of competing against her, and the price seems to be Jack’s attention. All of this happens while Karen’s father, Mr. Herz, talks to Jack about his father’s business on gypsum, something which attracts Mr. Herz who “by tradition, a farmer, made most of his money out of interests in gypsum mining.” While the men discuss business and the Karen is mentally competing with the other girl, Mr. Herz suddenly mentions how much Karen has grown up. It is no surprise that Oates decides to set this scene during a cattle judging, it is obvious that Karen’s father also feels the need to showcase Karen’s value as well as his cows, and since Jack is related to a profitable business for him, he sees this possible connection as an economical win for himself. This only deepens Karen’s need to be better than the other girl.

In *Sister Species*, Lisa Kemmerer recounts her findings after researching the conditions of many North American farms, which is interesting when analyzing Mr. Herz’s relationship with his cows and his daughters. Kemmerer states that “farmed animals are handled in such massive numbers that it is impossible for a worker to recognize them as individuals” and that female farmed animals are “the most abused of all farmed animals” (62). Female cows are used for breeding, milk, and meat, they are some of the most exploited animals in farms due to their multiple uses. Since Mr. Herz has more cows than ever, so much more that he needs to expand his barn, it makes sense that he is losing a vision of them as individual beings and only as production. It is not the first time this has happened with Mr. Herz, as mentioned before in the novel, he has had many wives, so many that he sometimes mixes them up. Karen’s self-perception is shaped by growing up in a rural environment where men are laborers and women breeders. Kemmerer also reflects on the matter of breeding, according to her, “there is a marked tendency to accuse women of breeding without mention of men, who are equally breeders” (38). It does not come as a surprise then, that Karen keeps meeting up with Jack even if she does not find him interesting. She has won him over, his father likes him, so she must follow that path, more than ever now that she has quit school and has no other prospect in life than marriage.

Mr. Herz is described by her daughter as a strong and assertive man; however, he is getting older, and it is clearly shown in the novel. When Karen’s brother Ed comes to visit the farm, he tells his father to avoid doing so much physical work, “there’s things to lift

around, you let them men do it. That's why you hired them", he tells him. Karen sees in her father a growing tension which she explains with the inevitable coming of Rule's death, which distracted him. This situation is worsened when Shar appears, a young and strong man who is about to inherit the adjoining land. It is evident that Mr. Herz does not like Shar from the beginning, he opposes his job as a car racer and is insulted when Shar insists on paying when they go out for dinner. Mr. Herz seems to feel threatened by Shar's presence.

It is then, after commenting about the number of dogs Herz has, that Shar shares a memory of Karen when she was a little girl, her first encounter with breeding. He tells her how she had asked him for help after finding a female dog having a litter, an act which had made Karen so sick she had implored him "to make them puppies go away" (36). It is interesting to see Karen's reaction to giving birth, something that is so natural on a farm, makes Karen cry and ask for the puppies to disappear. It is after this encounter that Karen and Jack fight when she tells him she is never going to marry and that she will stay on the farm and take care of her father.

It is possible that Rule's decay makes Karen realize her own father is aging and will eventually grow old and die too. While Mr. Herz reads the Bible to his daughters, around the fireplace, Karen avoids looking at her father "for fear of what she might see: an aging man, a man already old, forced to consider eternity by pains about his heart, forced to consider it alone; no one could help him" (44). At just seventeen years old, Karen is forced to think about hers and her father's future. Mr. Herz does not have a wife anymore to take care of him, and Karen does not see Celine as someone capable of doing it right, and therefore she might be the only one to fill that role, even if she does not know if she can do so. The day after, Karen wakes up early and joins her father's men for breakfast, she describes them as "a good lot generally: most of them over forty, with vague shifting pasts, strong arms, weathered faces, fatherly looks for her" (45). Karen reflects on how she is used to the company of men due to her living on a farm. It is then that Shar appears to share the news of his father's passing and makes Karen accompany him to town, under the false pretense that it is her father's orders.

After Shar tries to sexually abuse Karen and she causes the car they are in to fall over the bridge, Mr. Herz and his men are the ones to run to their rescue. Once Shar starts to angrily insult and blame Karen, Mr. Herz violently faces him. Although Karen's father seems to be angry with her too, as if he somehow blames her for what has happened, he asks her to withdraw to the safety of their home so he and his men can deal with the outsider. Mr. Herz first orders Shar to abandon his land, but Shar refuses to leave unless he retrieves his

car, his way of living and escaping. Once Shar answers back it becomes clear that the young man is not afraid of Mr. Herz, he even calls him old and keeps slandering Karen. Shar then threatens Mr. Herz, “you try to tell me what to do, you try to tell me a thing, I swear I’ll kill you! I’ll wring your buzzardly¹ neck till your eyes pop out!” (61). After these threatening words, Shar hits Karen before her father can stop him. Shar’s disrespect in Mr. Herz’s land, in front of his men, makes a physical confrontation the only solution for Karen’s father, he needs to prove his manhood.

Karen’s father decides to go back to his house so he can get his shotgun, his men follow him offering help, but once again he decides to do this on his own, “This is my personal business!” (62) Once armed, Mr. Herz is described as a menace while he appears through the fire caused by Shar’s burning Rule’s cabin, “Herz appeared, seeming to materialize out of the fire itself. He carried the shotgun proudly before him” (64). Even Karen seems to be afraid of her father, “He was unfamiliar and savage — a giant of a man in oil-smearred boots and rancher’s clothing, a stranger.” Oates depicts Mr. Herz as an old-time cowboy, with the clothes and his gun, ready to fight the offense made on his own land. What may seem heroic is seen by Karen as despicable, her father’s reaction does not elevate him, to the contrary, he is placed at the same level as Shar, “she saw that they were killers”. The placement of the confrontation is not random, they are standing on the frontier between Rule’s and Herz’s lands, “the rushing creek and the plowed land on the other side, rich black land notched against the sky”. Rule’s land is being consumed by Shar’s fire, the young man is bringing disorder and destruction towards Herz’s neatly cultivated land.

Oates’ manly depiction of Mr. Herz is ironically destroyed when Shar gets a hold of Herz’s gun while he is shooting it. Once disarmed, Shar starts to brutally hit Herz with his own shotgun, knocking him to his own ground. After his victory, Shar leaves through the forest, and Karen goes to her father’s aid, who is laying on the ground, “and in this position his chest looked queer and stuffed, as if only his breath had kept it strong” (66). It is then that Herz’s men come running to help, but it is already late, he has been incapable of defending his territory, the younger man has won, and so Herz desperately asks his daughter to avenge him, to go after Shar and kill him.

¹ A buzzard is a kind of vulture found in America. It can also describe a mean or disagreeable person.

IV) Racing as a means for male individualism and freedom

Gijs Mom explains in his book *Atlantic Automobility* that the use of cars for racing is said to have started in the second half of the 19th century in France, when cars' engines and designs were still on their prehistoric era. Mom describes the original cars as "a true hybrid, both technically and culturally" (61), its functionality was mainly inspired by the bicycle, its outside was designed after the carriages, and its steering from ships. After the bicycle, the car was the new reinvention of the horse, not only in terms of transportation but also in relation to sport's culture as well. Mom points out that the acquisition of cars was not merely urban, but rural also, at the beginning of the First World War 65% of worldwide cars were used in the U.S.A., most of them manufactured by Henry Ford.

However, at that time cars were a luxury that not everyone could afford, which "made the car culture more aristocratic than the bicycle culture and more geared toward racing rather than to the touring aspect" (Mom, 66). This way, the car followed the history of horse racing once again, it became normal for a wealthy person to pay for the racer's car as a business activity. Mom points out that around the first half of the twentieth century "the post-feudal nobilities and landed elites" (67) still had a lot of power on the U.S.A., both politically and economically, but the growth of industrialization which arose from the need of military manufacturing modernized the country socially by the rise of the working middle-class. For Mom, "the car fitted nicely into a new culture of adolescence [...] a stage of life in which the son (but usually not the daughter) could cultivate a sense of idealism."

It is also worth mentioning Mom's view on "the masculine conquest of nature" (84) which came from car racing. Riding horses, using carriages, and riding a bicycle, were seen as a connection between civilization and nature, past and present. However, this romanticization of nature as something separated from humanity has been widely criticized since it preserves the idea of nature as something "to be conquered, domesticated, consumed, and plundered" (Mom, 88). These ideas were not lost with the use of cars, driving to enjoy nature meant that it was there to be consumed, and added to the "fateful construction full of dominant male sexual and therapeutic connotations equating women, nature, and landscapes." Mom's ideas on the dangers of differentiating between nature and civilization take us back to Hawthorne's critique on wilderness versus civilization. Of course, nowadays, we know that the use of cars is worsening our already damaged environment, and there has been an increase in laws that try to moderate the use of automobiles to reduce pollution created by their emission of CO₂.

Men, primordially white, took over the invention of the car from the beginning, it was not until January 1st, 1900, that Anne Rainsford French Bush became the first woman on record to get a driving license, and it took until the 1970s for Janet Guthrie to be the first woman to ever qualify and compete in the Indianapolis 500 and Daytona 500 (“Timeline of Women in Transportation History”). Automobiles gave the freedom of movement and exploration to men, while women were downgraded to the use of public transport, and mostly accompanied. Mom analyzes some ideas taken from the beginning of the 20th century about women and driving, oddly enough, they were at first thought at better drivers because of the sexist idea of them being gentler and more delicate. This point of view expanded after the 1st World War, and Mom argues that it may be “the basis of stereotyping them as poor drivers”, something which was not believed before. However, all this prejudice did not stop women from joining the world of motor, many were members of the Automobile Club of America’s “Bureau of Tours”, and in NY Alice Ramsey (the first American woman to cross the continent) became the president of its own Women’s Automobile Club.

V) Racing in the United States

The history of racing in North America has been long connected with a constant rivalry with Europe, the United States seemed to need its racing to be unique and different from its predecessor in the old continent. As explained by an article written by the Henry Ford organization, auto racing has different varieties within the United States, nevertheless, they usually share some characteristics that differentiate them from Europe’s racing. The main features of American racing are “a love for pure speed”, which requires the lack of twists and turns so cars can go faster for longer periods of time; the audience’s ability to see the whole track so they do not miss any part of the race; shorter races, so there can be more than one done on one day; “insularity”, which means the preference of individual racers instead of teams; commercialism, many manufacturers sponsor races and cars to advertise their own products, not just automobile’s brands; and lastly, the grand spectacles, there are big ceremonies all around races and magnificent celebrations for the winners, music bands, food, and parades are commonly found in these events. The article even compares racers with Roman gladiators who “defy death for the amusement of the crowd” (Casey & Dodge, 4).

Car racers were a result of other forms of races, such as athletes, bicyclists, or jockeys. Even if drivers could have been thought at first to have less merit, due to the

apparent lack of physicality of the sport, the endurance needed in such a dangerous activity was rapidly applauded. The conditions of the tracks were also an issue, in the first half of the 20th century, racing tracks were made of dirt or clay, they were later improved with board tracks, but they were too expensive to maintain. There have been many different types of races in the United States. One of the earliest modalities was Indianapolis-style racing, named after the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, this oval 500-mile race has been run since 1911. After the 2nd World War, stock car racing became very popular, which created the nowadays worldwide sensation of NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing). The term stock car derives from “a car from a dealer’s stock, one that was unmodified” (Casey & Dodge, 10). This kind of racing became so popular that it started to attract a lot of business, improving the dirt tracks to superspeedways in the 1950s. There are other modalities, such as Drag racing, which involves just two drivers competing, or the more sophisticated sports car racing. In the novel I am analyzing, the races portrayed are more similar to NASCAR races.

VI) Racing in the novel

Once Karen escapes with Shar, she is taken from her rural upbringing and drawn into the world of automobile races. As a woman, she is placed into the passive position of the observer, she is there to witness and cheer over Shar’s victories. Karen is not even the first one to tell the reader about the first racing city described in the novel, the fictional Synderdale. Two male characters, Mitchie, a black driver, and Ponzi, a mechanic, take the reader through the pre-race ceremonies, probably because they are truly part of the racing community, and not just observers as Karen is. Even Mitchie, who is underestimated due to the color of his skin and described as “owned” by Shar’s racing company, has more of an active role in the world of racing than Karen will ever be capable of obtaining.

The eight-chapter starts with Oates describing the previously mentioned spectacle that occurs around races. The two men walk around the streets with pride, by being part of one of the racing companies they are somewhat protagonists of the celebrations. There are two celebrations happening at the same time, Synderdale’s volunteer firemen picnic and the race, which is celebrated there because the organizers had rented the town’s old fairground (which was used for horse racing in the past) for that day. There is a clear distinction made between drivers and owners in the race, it is obvious that, as explained before, there are wealthy men (in Shar’s case, Max) who control the racing companies, they are the ones who

pay for the machines and who hire the drivers and mechanics, all of whom are also male. Women are delegated to another sphere during the celebrations, they are either part of the marching bands that cheer for the firemen and the drivers, or audience members who seem to be looking for the drivers' attention. While the women are described as giggling girls, wearing short skirts or Sundaylike dresses and hats, Mitchie's dressing is described as professional, and even Ponzi, who is wearing grease-stained clothes, is also said to walk around with "his chest out" (Oates, 100). There is a sense of expertness and masculinity between the two characters, even though both are clearly underrated people, one because of racism, and the other because he is someone "whose ignorance had not yet been discovered".

The first time the reader gets an idea about Shar's view on racing comes from the conversation that occurs between these two men. Mitchie tells Ponzi how Shar once told him about his contempt for safety while drinking, and he seems to agree too "A man fell in love with a car, like some of us, he don't owe it to himself for things to be safe. They ain't worth it to be safe" (104). Ironically, Ponzi answers that he must be smarter than him if he understands such feeling, because he does find security important. Mitchie, who does not get the joke, goes on to praise Shar's dedication to his car, he says "He come in early with it himself and balanced the wheels himself. He won't let anybody else at it, he checks over the parts himself." This description of Shar's commitment takes us back to Karen's description of Mr. Herz and the cows, a man who does not let his hired men help him either. It is then that the men also discuss the dangers of racing, Mitchie mentions how Shar once almost burn his foot while driving. Ponzi is not impressed by it, he once again finds it ignorant to not be safe, which represents how Ponzi is seen as less of a man by his colleagues.

The track and the stadium where the race takes place are described as filled with people filled with excitement and ready to eat, drink, and enjoy the show. Both Max and Karen stand out in the crowd, him due to his body size, and her because of her blue linen dress, which is described as not belonging to the season or the place. We learn from Karen's reaction to the race that she indeed does not belong in the spectacle. Moments before the start of the race, Karen makes the following reflection about races:

The frank, excited murmur of the crowd put Karen in mind, as it always did, of the danger that was impending; the delight of the crowd depressed her, oppressed her, she felt the bitter certainty that this would be Shar's last race. She had seen many races, and each had promised to be the last (Oates, 128).

This extract perfectly summarizes Karen's feelings towards racing and everything that surrounds the sport. The fact that drivers constantly risk their lives and people go there, expectant of the likelihood of an accident sickens Karen. At the same time, Shar and his team, all men, are focused on preparing the car and the driver, which seem to be one machine combined. Karen, with her rural background, does not share Shar's devotion towards the silver car, she notes, "It sped above the dark earth with such precision and power that Karen felt, as always, the suggestion of something unnatural —almost mystical—in what she saw" (129). During the race, the audience becomes frenzied, screaming and cheering, even Jerry, Max's henchman who is said to despise Shar is enjoying the race, "like most of the men, Shar included, he seemed to come alive only at this spectacle of danger" (133).

It is during this race that the reader understands that Shar's violence is only exacerbated while driving. While competing for the first position, Shar and another driver in a red car, start teasing each other by driving next to each other, which worries both Max and Karen but entertains the audience. Jerry seems to understand what is about to occur, "Here comes an accident if I ever saw one" (135), at a turn, Shar's car sideswipes the other car, causing it to spin out of control, hit the retaining wall, and burst into flames. The crowd seems delighted with the casualty and Shar ends up winning the race, which, to Karen's disbelief, does not stop after the accident. The fact that Jerry sees it coming makes Karen realize that it has not been in fact an accident and that Shar knew what could happen to the other driver. "Shar is a killer", Karen says out loud, as if his violence towards her and her father had not yet made it clear to her until that moment. She understands then that both her and her baby's lives are at great risk.

The audience takes an important role in Synderdale's race, a lot of people want to see the show. A fellow driver mentions that seating in the stands is worth at least one dollar while seating in the grass is merely half a dollar and complains about how a local businessman is taking advantage of this by offering his own stand, made from pipes, to overcrowd it and charge the audience a lot of money. During the race, the audience is alarmed when the speaker announces an accident, however, they pay little attention to it once they realize it has happened outside the track. Later, after the race, Ponzi shares the news that the stand had collapsed, and the fatal crash had caused deaths and serious injuries to those who were on it. Disturbingly, while some people from the audience were aiding the victims, the majority kept on following the race, even eating and drinking. This accident makes clear the importance of the racing spectacle, people are there to watch a violent sport, and many expect an accident to happen, they find it thrilling. It is no surprise that death and

suffering do not alarm them enough to stop the show. This is the reason why Jerry asks Ponzi to stop telling the story and to leave the bar they are at. They are celebrating Shar's victory, and they do not care for the casualties, not even for the driver whom Shar has pushed outside of the track and ends up dying on the spot. It is only Karen who realizes the traumatic experience Ponzi has witnessed and acknowledges him by saying "You've suffered" (151).

Oates uses another fictional city, Cherry River, as the setting for the second and last race of the novel. The city is supposed to be along the southeast coast of the country, and its past is connected to liquor distilleries, tobacco plantations, and sailing merchants. Cherry River's decadence seems to have been saved by the addition of a huge auto-racing track, after that the boardwalk was amplified, there was a 50-cent fee for admission to enter the beach, and restaurants, nightclubs, games, and tents were incorporated too. A couple of gambling syndicates were making money out of Cherry River thanks to the people who came to see the races. The 4th of July race is the biggest spectacle in the city, and it is the one that Shar is planning on winning after abandoning Karen at Synderdale.

Shar tries to get away from Max's control by declining his offer of accommodation in one of the motels partially owned by the businessman. Shar despises the fact that he needs Max's money to race, there would be no car and mechanics if it was not for him. At one point he even tells Mitchie, his substitute driver, "They can buy anything, the best drivers, the best mechanics, the best races. They can buy me, I s'pose...I s'pose they have. But when I'm out there, there's no bastard that owns me." (198) It seems like Shar only feels free when racing, and every time he prepares for the next race, he thinks of himself as one of Max's possessions. Shar mentions how he would prefer to drive a Grand Prix, which is a more professional race made in better conditions, more like the ones in Europe, but Max does not let him, even after he has damaged almost every part of his body doing these races for him. Shar even implies that Max might only want to obtain the fifty-thousand-dollar death policy he has on him. Desperately, Shar tells Mitchie, "How'd you like that, a real road for once? Not a goddam horse track —a greyhound track! I been so many times around a circle I'm sick to death of it; how do you get out of a circle but carried out in parts?" (199). It is obvious that Shar despises the American style of racing because it is less technically challenging and more of a death trap for the drivers. However, he seems to notice that it may already be late for him to run those circuits, he claims, not fully convinced, that he still has at least ten more years, but he knows it is not true. Shar's injuries added to his age make him perishable in racing, it is already late for him to make his dream come true. Shar's depressing state only gets worse when goes with Mitchie and some girls to a circus on the boardwalk. There, a

race is announced, one where the contestants are handicapped people who are missing body parts. Shar feels taunted by the mockery and refuses to watch the show.

The celebrations surrounding the racer are even bigger than in Synderdale since the visitors are also ready to commemorate Independence Day. The stadium is filled with the U.S.A. flags and banners, but ironically, the independence is not a celebration for all. There is a lot of racial tension around the race, and the fact that a black driver, called Vanilla Jones, has a chance of success only makes matters worse. Shar enters the race as a broken man, suicidal after Karen's miscarriage and her words of hatred towards him. Before entering the car, Shar reflects on the audience's motivation. For a moment he questions the common view that people go to the races to see men die or even Max's idea that it had to do with the skills and victory, Shar believes it is the only moment when some of those people can feel the risk by putting themselves in a driver's point of view. Shar notes, "If the driver lived they were cheated, and if he died they were cheated. It was a mock communion and Shar understood that only the driver could get any satisfaction out of it" (266). Shar seems to find sense in the madness of racing by this reflection as if there was a purpose on his actions. Shar enters his car knowing he is going to die, he finds himself guilty, death is the only solution, and the safety mechanisms which separate him from his own mortality repulse him. During the mortal race, Shar takes off his gloves so he can fully feel the steering wheel, he even tries to take off his helmet but is unable to do so while driving. Moments before hitting the retaining wall on purpose at full speed Oates describes Shar's final inner thoughts "How proud of his manhood! How proud of being loved!" (275). Shar dies on the track, some people believe it to be Vanilla Jones' fault, and others think it was an accident. But Karen knows the truth, Shar has committed suicide because he does not want to continue his harrowing life. Somehow, Karen has fulfilled her father's wishes to kill Shar.

4.4 Sexual Abuse

I) Derivatization and abuse

The World Health Organization considers violence against women a major public health problem since they estimate that 30% of women around the world have suffered from physical and/or sexual violence, and 27% of women have suffered these types of abuse by an intimate partner. The United Nations Women's Organization states that 24% of teenage girls (15-19 years old) have experienced these abuses too. Sadly, this situation has worsened

since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic which appears to have risen the risk factors for violence against women, apparently due to the lockdown measures and the difficulties of acquiring medical attention. Renée Heberle and Victoria Grace went over this issue a decade ago in their book *Theorizing Sexual Violence*, where they unite a collection of essays about the subject. In their introduction, they explain why sexual violence is a feminist concern since the number of women who suffer from it keeps on increasing even though the feminist movement has been trying to educate and promote legislations to avoid the atrocities committed against women.

Within these essays, we find the article “Sexual Violence and Objectification” made by Ann J. Cahill, in which she wonders how sexual violence is still oppressing women in an era where many argue that “women have, allegedly, achieved such social and political equality as to make feminism obsolete and unnecessary” (14). Cahill argues that nowadays there is too much focus on objectification which has made the concept “overly cumbersome”, she argues that the term ‘derivatization’ is better fitted to describe the common conception of objectification of women. For Cahill, the problem of abuse towards women does not rely simply on seeing women as “not things”, but on the fact that women are “reduced to other person’s desires, wishes, or projects”. According to Cahill, “to derivatize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a subject solely as the reflection, projection or expression of another subject’s being, desires, fears, etc.” Cahill acknowledges the fact that men are also victims of sexual violence, but she is interested in why sexual violence by men, and mostly towards women, is so disproportionate in comparison.

One of the reasons why Cahill does not find the concept of objectification useful is because it relies on two points of view, either the woman is seen as not human, and therefore a “justifiable target for violence” (16), or as a sex object, something to use for sex. For her, this second view claims “that the construction of heterosexuality in contemporary Western culture demands that sexuality and dominance are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable, such that to be a sex object, to be on the receiving end of a sexualizing, male gaze, always comes with the threat of violence” (17). Cahill notes that both points of view “can be understood as causes *and* effects of sexual violence”. In connection with objectification, Cahill analyzes two perspectives on sexual violence by theorists Susan Brownmiller and Catherine MacKinnon. Brownmiller believes that the basis of sexual violence is far from sexual, and it is more connected with the execution of power and the male domination of women. On the other hand, MacKinnon sees sexual violence as “the logical extension of a culture that eroticized domination and submission” (18). Cahill believes both angles lack

something to fully explain the female experience of sexual abuse. For her, Brownmiller's intention to separate sex from sexual abuse may fall into categorizing it as another type of physical violence, whilst Mackinnon's ideas on sexual abuse are based on the concept of women being sex objects and dismisses the control factor. According to Cahill, both approaches "do not sufficiently account for the relevance of the body and the complex role of intersubjectivity with regard to sexual violence", as they rely on the dichotomization of ideas such as mind/body.

Cahill believes that by escaping the scope of objectification, sexual abuse can be better defined. If the victim is not understood as an object to her assailant, her suffering becomes real too, which is something the victimizer is looking for. As Cahill puts it, "Only an embodied subject, with a certain level of sentience and consciousness, who has the possibility of sexual (inter)subjectivity, can be harmed by the imposition of an unwanted sexual encounter" (21). Cahill mentions the psychoanalytic perspective given by Jessica Benjamin, who explains that sexual abuse "involves the seeking of and destruction of recognition". Cahill explains with this that even in the cases when incapacitating drugs are used, they are "conscious steps to overcome her subjectivity" (22). Cahill finishes this reflection by adding "One cannot rape an inanimate object; nor does rape turn a victim into an inanimate object. She remains, painfully, an embodied being, vulnerable to harm, yes, but a subject nevertheless."

Cahill's idea of sexual violence as derivatization is then explained when "the ability to control, define, and force the sexual encounter lies only with him" (25). According to her, "to be a thing-for-sex can be delightful if one's own sexuality is fully present in the interaction", but in rape, the victim's sexuality is never expressed, it is intersubjective to the male's domination, who is the one actually having sexual intercourse. As Cahill puts it, "Only one person is really 'having sex'; the other person is having sex imposed upon them". Derivatization explains then how the victim's subjectivity must be present so it can be "eclipsed".

The concept of derivatization is also of interest when discussing animal abuse. Going back to Lisa Kemmerer's *Sister Species*, she argues that whereas animals can be divided between male and female sexes, there is a tendency of genderizing them, something that is in fact a social construct, "as 'proof' that certain kinds of behaviour are typically male or typically female" (54). Of course, the wide variety of animal species in the planet makes it easy to find a behavior that proves gender-based conduct. As Kemmerer points out, this attitude led researchers to disregard some common behaviors, such as homosexual

tendencies in many species, while at the same time generating forced sexist stereotypical behaviors in some animals. This would be the case of fighting cocks, for example, who have historically been perceived as masculine, hence the use of the word ‘cock’ as a synonym for penis. Owning, training, and betting on cock fights have always been linked to men. Ironically, roosters are not this violent in their natural habitat. Roosters are known to protect the flock against possible predators and look for food along with hens. As Kemmerer explains, fights between roosters may occur but they are short and rarely mortal.

Carol J. Adams states in her foreword for *Sister Species*, that in Western cultures there is a tendency of animal oppression based on their objectification, their subjectivity is erased for breeding, exhibiting, hunting, or feeding other beings. At the same time, Kemmerer finds it strange that an animal’s life can be spared only if a human owner comes to its rescue. For her, property as a means of a decent life for an animal means that they are seen as objects. It seems contradictory that the objectification of animals functions as a justification for their abuse and their salvation. This could be resolved by looking at the problem with Cahill’s view on derivatization. It is not that humans see animals as objects, they are simply inferior subjects, less than a human, and therefore humans can decide what to do with them, use them or spare them. Under this scope, we can then understand some abuses which are perpetrated towards both human and nonhuman females, such as forced breeding, solely taking care of their offspring, and even sexual violence. Female animals can be sexually abused by other animals or even humans, known as bestiality. Farmers will use animal abuse to maintain their female animals pregnant as many times as possible so they can give them more products (meat or milk).

Now that sexual abuse has been analyzed from a feminist and ecofeminist perspective, we can delve into Oates’ depiction of sexual abuse in *With Shuddering Fall*, something which is constantly present for the protagonist throughout the novel, and which could be said that sets the plot in motion.

II) Sexual and physical abuse in the novel

Sexual abuse marks Shar and Karen’s tumultuous relationship from the beginning of their connection. However, it is implied that Shar is not the first one to perform such type of abuse on Karen. While Karen is following Shar in the woods after her father asks her to go after him and kill him, the protagonist remembers something that happened to her at school when she was about thirteen years old.

Living in a rural area, Karen's school was a schoolhouse, a building consisting of just one room, placed in a muddy yard in the middle of two fields. As it happens with this kind of school, Karen is part of a class where students are not the same age, rural areas do not have enough children to have groups separated by age. Since Karen is the youngest of her siblings she is left alone at school, with no one to accompany her. Karen describes going to school as if she was an animal being hunted, to the point that she looks behind her before hurriedly entering the building. She only feels safe once she is sitting at her desk in the presence of the teacher, even though the school is described as a weak representation of civilization in the middle of nature it is enough for Karen to make her feel protected. Karen's school is a place where authority is held by men, both the young teacher and the bullies, even the decoration represents this idea with the pictures of famous men placed above the students. Although education should be a path towards freedom and individuality for Karen, the constant presence of male authority makes it seem as if she is out of place in the educative system. She even has to force her presence into her own arithmetic book, which previously belonged to her brother Judd, by adding her name above Judd's. However, she does not do it in an attempt to gain power, she does it just to feel a connection with someone who does not care about her.

At this point in the novel, the reader already knows that Karen is no longer at school, it is discussed when she goes out with Jack, Celine, and Albert. In that meeting, Jack mentions there has been some kind of trouble at the Revere wedding between them, something which made him violent to the point he broke a chair. However, it is not explained until Karen remembers that day at school why she has chosen to leave her studies and who the Reveres are. Back to that memory, Karen remembers the older boys arriving at school in a menacing way. Depicted dressed in a rural way, with hunting boots and overalls, Karen places attention on their hands which are "big and moving, constantly moving" (77). Every time the teacher is distracted or looking in another direction, the big boys take the opportunity to terrify Karen, the one behind her even violently grabs her by her hair with a closed fist. It is then that we learn the identity of Karen's abuser, a Revere boy four years older than her and still in her grade. The boy is described as bothering Karen in any way possible during the class, by poking at her, talking to her in a teasing manner, and throwing at her an obscene drawing labeled as Karen. The boys laugh at his behavior, and the girls avoid her, making Kare feel even more isolated. Karen tries to survive the abuse by ignoring

the Revere boy, she does not even leave the building at recess after being attacked by him during a game of “pom-pom-pull-away”².

The only adult presence in the school, the young teacher, notices Karen’s odd behavior and questions her to know what is wrong. However, Karen does not think he is able to help her, she describes him as “the sole, if inadequate, protection for the young children” (78). That day, he insists on knowing if it is the big boys who frighten her. This question makes it clear that the teacher is aware of the boys’ abusive behavior, however, he puts the responsibility for the punishment in Karen’s hands. Ironically, Karen sees the name of her abuser carved on the wood wall, which exemplifies how he forces his way into that environment. The teacher makes Karen decide if he should take action, which is unfair for a kid in that position. It should be mentioned how the teacher tries to justify the boys’ actions by saying “It isn’t because they don’t like you” (79), which adds to the common and dangerous misconception of boys will tease girls because they fancy them. This idea is problematic because it uses attraction to justify abuse toward women and teaching this notion to kids can lead to girls equating violent behaviors with love.

It is in this uncomfortable exchange between the teacher and Karen, as he tries to force some type of formal complaint from her, that Karen explodes and calls the attackers “nasty” and tells him that she doesn’t want him to touch her. Even though until that moment the teacher seems to be accusing the boys generally for the bullying, he asks if “him” is the Revere boy. Making it clear, once again, that he knows more than he is leading her to believe. Karen tells the teacher that she does not fear the Revere boy, even though it is clear she is terrified, she brushes it off by saying that she just does not want him to touch her. The teacher asks her where the Revere boy touches her, and even if Karen does not answer he seems to understand the kind of groping that is occurring, he once again justifies the abusive behavior by lamenting that he is still at school at his age and implies that his growing up explains the action. “Boys that age are— are getting to be—” (80) he says, without finishing his explanation, by using this line of thought the teacher seems to see sexual desire as an unstoppable force for men, which is as troubling as his previous thought on abuse.

Karen starts to feel uneasiness around the teacher when he insists on her giving more details about the boy’s touching. Holding her by the arm he asks her again in a whisper, as Oates describes the scene, “There was something urgent about his voice that shocked Karen. “Don’t be ashamed to tell me” (81). It seems as if the teacher is not asking her because he

² A made-up playground game, similar to tag but more violent, where kids are allowed to strike a blow for tag.

wants to help her, as it has been noticed before it looks like he knows exactly what is going on and there may be a reason for his lack of action. It looks like Oates is trying to portray the teacher as another possible abuser, who already knows that Karen is an easy target, already abused and isolated from the rest, who does not speak up against her attacker. The way the teacher asks her makes the reader believe that he might find this pleasurable in some kind of disgusting way. Karen's shock turns into anger, she yells at her teacher telling him that she is not either afraid or ashamed and when the teacher insists on knowing she pulls her skirt up, making him feel alarmed and ashamed in contrast. "You leave me alone too!" (82) Karen screams at her teacher and leaves, feeling joy for her bravery.

This incident is important to understand Karen's relationship with abuse. From the beginning of the novel, we see that Karen feels isolated even by her own family, she does not really connect with her only female sibling as she seems to have difficulties interacting with other females, and her brothers are too old and masculine to have any meaningful relationship with them. It is worth mentioning that Shar and Karen use the woods near the farm as a getaway path and their first sexual relationship happens there. Interestingly, going back to Susan Hawthorne, she finds the forest as a middle point between civilization and wilderness, she points out that, in medieval times, the forests were owned by kings and nobility and used for their leisure time. Hawthorne connects this with her own childhood playing in the woods which bordered her house. For Hawthorne, and as previously mentioned in this final dissertation, "the history of "civilization" is the history of deforestation" (219). The forest seems to be used on purpose in the novel to signify the lack of order that is linked to civilization, once Karen enters the woods, bitten up and traumatized by Shar's previous abuse, she remembers how it is not the first time someone has taken advantage of her and she gives up to Shar, letting him get what he wants of her as she finds herself unfit to kill him and comply with her father's wishes. Karen can no longer use inaction for survival as she did when she was little, her father already doubts her innocence and he has suffered the consequences of facing Shar, he cannot protect her. Knowing that going back home without avenging the attack on his father and being seen as the cause of the trouble, she decides to go with Shar and accept his abuse.

Before Shar's rape attempt, there is another man who threatens Karen with this type of abuse, her love interest, Jack. I have already mentioned how Karen is not truly interested in Jack as a romantic partner, she seems to have simply felt the joy of winning his attention from the other girl at the church's picnic. Jack is almost ten years older than Karen, who is still a teenager, by today's standards, this is considered grooming. Karen is seventeen, she

is above the age of consent, which already was 16 in most USA states back in the '60s, but the fact that Jack is almost ten years older than her makes the age differential between them bigger than 5, which is the bigger gap accepted by the USA (Maine and Hawaii). It seems like there has not been sexual intercourse between them, so there has not been statutory rape, however, Jack is obviously interested in Karen. Karen's lack of interest makes Jack angry; we know he gets physical by his mention of the breaking of a chair in the Revere wedding. There is not much explanation of what happened at the wedding but knowing Karen's traumatic relationship with the Revere family it is possible that she was not comfortable there.

There are two meetings between Jack and Karen portrayed in the novel, the first one is at a bar with Celine and Albert where they discuss how cruel kids can be. This conversation stems from the fact that they think Karen has left school because of bullying. Karen tells them she believes even if people behave differently when they grow up, they still have the same urges but now they know they cannot do as they want. Of course, the people around Karen do not know what she has suffered at school, they understand she is talking about immature teasing and pranks. It is interesting the fact that Jack asks Karen "Do you think I want to?" (19), at first glance it may seem innocent, as Jack does not know Karen has been sexually abused at school, but knowing his aggressiveness towards Karen and how he behaves later in the novel, Karen answering affirmatively may portray she thinks Jack is the same as the Revere boy, he just controls his impulses. Karen's belief that all men around her want to do the same thing the Revere boy did, they are just controlling themselves, helps the reader understand why she keeps on having dates with Jack and continues her relationship with Shar for so long. Karen does not believe that she can be entirely safe in the presence of a man, she thinks sexual abuse is always a possibility. By believing this, Karen cannot consider having a partner that will treat her in a healthy and respectable way.

This approach to relationships explains what happens afterward at the bar. After Jack inquires about the reasons behind Karen dropping out of school, she withdraws from the conversation. Celine knows something is wrong and tells the two men it is better to leave. Jack does not understand and asks Karen if everything is ok. Karen tells him that nothing is wrong but goes on wondering about how pointless it is for people to be attracted to people who are not interested in them. Jack takes offense at Karen's words, and her further explanation only makes matters worse when she says "A girl's legs somewhere pick a man to love them —or a man's voice, or the way he lights a cigarette. Isn't that so?" (20) Jack

maliciously answers her that she does not know what she is talking about since she has not “done a hell of a lot of living yet”, implying she is a virgin.

This exchange demonstrates both Jack's and Karen's ignorance, Jack believes that sexual intercourse is needed for a person to understand how attraction works, and Karen is caught up by her mistaken idea of how attraction functions. It could be said that Karen's point of view falls into the idea of women as objects that was previously discussed in this chapter. Karen answers Jack by saying “What do you care for me, except—”, Celine interrupts her but it is obvious that Karen believes that Jack is only interested in her in a sexual way, which makes her aware of his grooming. Jack proves she is right when after Celine tells her that she has caused enough trouble for the day (referencing her dispute with her father at Rule's house) he forcefully kisses her after asking “What kind of trouble are you in, little lady? My little Karen?” (21). Karen's passivity makes him angrier; he knows there is no reciprocating between them, which makes his perseverance on a younger girl even worse. Celine and Albert's reactions to Jack's words and actions make it clear that deep down they do not approve of that relationship, however, they do nothing.

It is after leaving the bar with Jack that Karen stops Shar's car, going from one relationship to the other makes sense now that her toxic view of romance is explained. Before Shar's car appears, Karen begs Jack to run away with her, she is desperate to escape the town, and she believes that if Jack would do that for her, she would love him, or, “would have to love him” (24) in exchange. Jack tells her to stop with the nonsense of escaping and tells her that she is not a kid anymore. It is interesting to note how Jack's opinion on Karen's maturity changes depending on what suits him better. When Karen implies her lack of interest, he calls her a little girl who has not experienced enough to have an opinion, when she wants to be active and thinks about getting away from there, she is too old to think this way. This dualistic view of Karen's maturity, who is still a teenager, not a kid nor an adult, is portrayed by different characters throughout the story. While Shar's car is approaching the pair, Jack viciously tells her “Someday someone's going to drag you off into the woods or into a barn, [...] Then you'll wish it had been me. You'll wish you had somebody that loved you then. Even if it was just a bother to you” (25). Jack's words only confirm Karen's thoughts on what he wants to do, to take advantage of her for his own pleasure. Jack is faking concern about her, what he is actually doing is emotionally blackmailing her, he knows she is not truly interested in him, and instead of letting her go, he tells her that the other possibility out there for her is sexual abuse. Something worse than him. Jack is portraying

himself as a savior, she is protected from other vile men. By doing this, Jack is reinforcing Karen's idea of men being naturally sexual predators.

The last time Jack and Karen meet is at the Herz's cemetery, with the tombs of Mr. Herz's wives in front of them, which unsettles Jack. Karen, who has the reality of death more present than ever after visiting Rule, tells him she will be buried there too, this angers Jack who finds it offensive that she does not think she will be buried with her husband. It is then that Karen tells him she does not believe she will marry, astonished, Jack answers that all girls get married and because she is a beautiful one she will indeed too. Jack takes Karen's words as a personal offense and does not believe she can have that opinion by herself implying that her father must have convinced her so she can take care of him. Jack represents a very sexist point of view, first, he believes a woman must marry as a life fulfillment, then he thinks that if Karen does not want to do so it must be because another man has convinced her, so she takes care of him instead of a husband. It is obvious that Jack, as many people did back then (and sadly now too), believes that it is a woman's role to be the one who takes care of the men around her, father, husband, and sons.

Jack reacts to Karen's news with despise, he calls her poison and laments not having listened to the ones that tried to warn him about her, he calls her a child who is not mentally stable and bids her farewell by telling her that his brother does not consider her pretty. Jack isolates Karen even more with these sibylline words, not only does he insult her mentally and physically, he makes it clear how everybody thinks the same about her. Sadly, Karen is so used to this kind of abuse that she does not feel insulted she just feels relieved because she now does not have to continue meeting with Jack. Even if she thinks Jack will eventually feel ashamed of his words, she does believe they are true.

It does not help that the next man Karen encounters turns out to be an abuser too. Shar is someone whom Karen knew from a young age, a neighbor, and an old friend of her brothers. She should be able to trust him the same way she trusts her father's men. However, Shar shows his violent demeanor from the beginning, when Karen stops Shar's car by standing in the middle of the road he threatens her to do it again so he can run them over. Karen compares him to a hawk, "one of the soiled, shabby birds of prey that circle the skies" (28), she is giving an animal a masculine trait because she thinks it is natural for the male sex to be violent. Karen's misconception about how all men are abusers by nature probably drifts from her own relationship with her father, the main male figure in her life. Mr. Herz is never portrayed as physically violent with Karen, but he is constantly using his authority to force her into behaving as he likes. The day after meeting Shar again, Karen goes to church

with her family, it is then that Ed shows concern about his father's wellbeing and recommends he do less labor work at the farm. Karen feels offended by her brother's implication that Mr. Herz is too old or weak and talks back at him to defend their father. Mr. Herz laughs at Karen and tells his son "These women get out of hand" (22). By forcing her to take care of old Rule, and mocking her when she speaks her mind, Karen's father is teaching her to be quiet and obey. This leaves Karen unshielded from the abuse she has been facing she was a child. Karen is not allowed to develop into a functional individual human, and it is because she is a woman.

The tension that unfolds between Mr. Herz and Shar makes Karen distrust him, she feels "a sense of warning, of something unavoidable they must —together— defeat, and at the same time a sense of vague uncontrollable excitement, a desire for this violence to happen" (35). Karen, who is the black sheep of her family, who is portrayed as desperately being part of the clan, believes that she can join her father in fighting against the new alpha male in their land, Shar. This makes Mr. Herz's defeat later in the novel an even greater tragedy for Karen, he does not let him join him in the fight, and even worse, he cannot protect her. It is because of her father's dislike of Shar that Karen is not comfortable when she goes with Shar to town, but after he insists that it is her father's idea for her to join him, she enters his car. Karen has gotten into trouble before for arguing with her father in Rule's cabin, she does not want to defy him again, and this is the reason why she goes with Shar even if she does not want to. Mr. Herz's forced authority has turned Karen into someone who finds it hard to say no, even when she, who believes that male company equals danger, knows that Shar may want to take advantage of her.

When she enters the car, she feels "cold and baffled, as if a fog had come between her and what she must see so that she could not exactly understand what was happening" (48), Karen's intuition is telling her she is in danger, and sorrily it is true. While crossing the bridge, from when she would later force the car over, Karen remembers how afraid she used to be about being on it and how Shar and the other boys would jump from it as entertainment, foreshadowing their accident. Shar starts to criticize his recently dead father by telling her how violent he was, this makes Karen uncomfortable, as she finds disrespecting a father a very serious offense, even if Rule's actions could be easily condemned. It is then that Shar tells her that his own mother, whom he calls "a real country bitch" (51), abandoned him with his father when he was little. It is implied that Shar's toxic relationship with females might come from his own feelings of abandonment, he obviously blames his mother for having suffered Rule's abuse.

When Shar enters the sheriff's office Karen, who feels she is in danger, says out loud "This was a mistake" (52). After she declines Shar's offer to go with him to do some errands and stays in the car, Karen reflects on Jack's words, how it may be true that she is not mentally stable if she has accepted to come with Shar. Karen does not realize that it is because Shar has used her father as an excuse to obey him that she is there. She wrongly blames herself for being in that position, not realizing that she is a victim of her sexist upbringing. Karen is so anxious about her situation that she starts crying and wonders if she should get out of the car and look for help, however, she does not feel she has any reason to justify doing so. Shar weirdly stares at her while she cries from the outside, finding her distress pleasant. When they are on the way back to the farm, Karen feels she will be safe soon, but Shar starts physically taking her space. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding Karen's shoulder, controlling both the car and her, he starts to drive faster and tells her how he could kill them both if he wished.

After threatening Karen, he asks her if she likes him and then stops the car and takes her hand placing it on his thigh, "I'll make it fast" (56) he says. Karen is terrified and in disbelief, she does not know how to escape from what is about to happen to her. After telling him she does not wish to be there and that she does not understand what is happening, Shar tells her that she cannot fool him since he has seen her with Jack. Shar, who is thirty years old, believes Karen has more experience than she does because he has seen her with another older male, and presumes there must have been sexual intercourse between them. He also believes he has the right to take advantage of her and takes pleasure in it. Shar even starts gaslighting her by asking her why she has chosen to come with him, denying he has told her it was her father's idea. He finally confesses that her father had told him to use his phone, and Karen feels trapped. Shar wants to have sex with Karen, but he also wants her to be part of it, he even tries to convince her by saying "'I'll be good," he said, trying to keep down his anger, trying to speak evenly and hypnotically. "I'll open you up for that bastard. Come on. Come on" (57). There is no doubt that Shar is being abusive with Karen, she has already told him she does not want anything to do with him, he has misled her to have her in a vulnerable position, and he knows she is terrified. By trying to convince her to have sex he is trying to make her think she has a choice, knowing that she might accept it just because she feels she has no other option, or he can do something worse to her. He is coercing Karen into having sex with him.

When Shar's twisted method does not work with Karen he decides to keep on driving, he tries to shame her by telling her that she is too young, as Jack did before, while still holding her by her neck. Karen thinks Shar is about to strangle her as a "punishment for the wrong she had done", she does not understand that the only one who has done something wrong is Shar, and she blames herself again. When they are at the bridge again, near the house, Shar tries again to force himself on Karen.

It is then that Karen decides that the only way out is death, Oates writes "In her mind they were guilty, shameful; [...] and she felt that both she and Shar must be punished" (58). Karen keeps on repeating "not here" because if she lets Shar abuse her near her home it would mean that she is no longer safe in there. Her home is civilization, the farm is a place where her father rules, and she cannot make up her mind that Shar can do something so terrible there. Therefore, Karen steers the car's wheel and makes them fall from the bridge, knowing they might die. Death is better than the destruction of the idea of home.

When her father appears to rescue them, his disgust toward Karen after Shar starts to blame her makes the protagonist feel ashamed, deepening her guilt. However, while the two men explode in violence, she tries to help Shar, even after he has physically abused her too, by imploring him to escape before her father kills him. Karen's problem relies on her normalization of male abuse toward women since she finds it unavoidable for men it is her fault to put herself in that situation. At the same time, her father's reading of biblical tales every Sunday teaches her how important it is to obey one's father, and by mocking her or disciplining her every time she speaks her mind or does not want to do as she is told he makes her a target for abuse. This is why she tries to help Shar because she does not understand that the men who have abused her are not justifiable because they are men, and that abuse is not an innate male characteristic. In the same way, she believes his father has a right to control his land and the animals on it, and she believes that men taking control of women is the natural order of things.

Karen gets into the forest, which has been already established as a place outside civilization according to Western thought, she knows she will be unable to kill Shar even if it is an order from her father. There, Karen remembers the abuse she suffered from the Revere boy, and incapable of moving forward, she accepts abuse as her destiny because she is a woman. When Karen finds Shar he tells her to go back home, but she cannot go back, which infuriates Shar, who does not understand why she did not want anything to do with him in the car but now he cannot get rid of her. Ironically, Karen's father is present in the scene somehow, as they are standing in front of old abandoned farm buildings that belong

to him, nature is taking back a portion of land which was obviously used by him before. Even though Karen tells Shar that she wants him and follows him, it is crystal clear that she does not want to have sex with him. Oates describes how Karen shields herself by covering her face with her hands, and how Shar forces her into the old barn. The animals around them portray Karen's unrest, birds "called out warnings to one another, as if they had just seen something that frightened them" (83) and when Shar opens the barn, rats ran away.

Two other examples of sexual abuse are depicted between Shar and Karen, one is told as a memory and the other one happens in Cherry River, before the 4th of July race. When Karen arrives in Synderdale with Max, Jerry, and the doctor, she is described as Shar's girl, implying that they are romantically linked. After Shar wins the race the group celebrates the deadly victory at a bar, where other girls join them. While Shar is filled with stamina from the race and enjoys being praised for his performance without showing any remorse, Karen is unable to see him as anything else than a murderer.

When Karen whispers to Ponzi that she knows he's suffered because, in some way, she feels connected with the other weak link at the table, a man who is not respected by the others, Shar becomes mad asking her to say it out loud. Karen does not obey and Shar starts calling her a cheap bitch and blaming her for leaving her father in those conditions, "Come crawling to me for it! Left the old man bleeding like a pig —flat on his back in the mud!" (152). Shar not only does not take responsibility for the death at the race, but he also blames Karen for things he has done. It was Shar who left Mr. Herz hurt, and it was also him who left Karen with no other option than to follow him and accept his abuse. It is interesting that Shar compares Mr. Herz with a farm animal, a pig, when a human also bleeds, it is a way of dehumanizing Karen's father.

Max decides to end the altercation by taking Karen to her room, the one she shares with Shar. There, Karen thinks about the argument and the possibility that Shar might spend the night with one of those girls at the bar. It is worth noting that the argument makes Karen think about the times her father, she thinks about how lonely she felt "after some trivial argument her father had really forgotten about her and was not going to seek her out to ask for forgiveness" (155). Again, Oates emphasizes how Karen's relationship with her father has damaged to the point of accepting toxic and abusive behaviors such as those committed by Shar. Filled with jealousy, Karen tries to keep calm and thinks about the importance of maintaining that state with the following words,

She had not just recently learned the value of forced, feigned calm; it had been with her for years. Her father had taught her that. Had she not witnessed the perfect control with which he had faced death?—her own mother’s death, when Karen was still a child, and she and the others had been forbidden to enter that queer-smelling room for so long. Men spoke of his steadiness at hunting; there was some story, some vague story of a wounded bear, she remembered, a dog torn in half, and her father...her father doing something, something unexpected and brave (157).

This extract showcases Karen’s image of worth in men, their capacity to conceal emotion, no matter the suffering, and their control over the environment make them strong and brave. Karen’s father is a real man because he does not complain and cannot just kill farm animals but also wild animals, he controls nature.

Karen remembers the outcome of the first sexual abuse while contemplating the dirty yellow wallpaper of the room, probably a nod to Perkin’s short story knowing that Karen ends up in a mental hospital. It is said that Shar and Max keep on looking at newspapers to see if Karen’s family is looking for her, but nothing shows up. This calms the men but makes Karen feel more isolated believing her family has disowned her for her actions. She starts to follow the racing team from city to city, living in hotel rooms with no stability. Karen is tied to Shar because she has nowhere nor no one to go to, creating toxic co-dependency. It is never truly explained why Shar takes Karen with him, however, as someone who does not understand love and who has been battered all his life, he does not want to be without her. This co-dependency seems to be the root of their tortuous relationship, in which both suffer and harm the other in different ways, while both believe they are in love.

Karen believes that by forcing him to be with her she is somehow retaliating his abuse, she even wonders “upon whom had that violation been performed? It was true that her body was changed, but this change was not really within her experience—it was abstract and theoretical” (166), Karen tries to relativize her rape to keep that calmness her father has taught her, to feel in control over her body and Shar, “It was Karen’s icy reserve that controlled the game” (167). She thinks that by forcing Shar to talk to her, to take care of her, she is punishing him for what he started, but she is only extending her own abuse. She is behaving like one of her father’s farm animals, she believes that if she stays calm in her plot, allowing Shar to take from her what she wants, and does not whine nor escape, she will gain something. She thinks of it as a game, probably because she prefers it rather than facing danger.

With all those thoughts on her mind, she remembers the second time Shar forces her to have sex, in another city, in a cemetery, where she feels like someone who has already died and escaped from her grave. Karen tries to stop Shar, once again, by telling him she

might bleed, he disregards her worries and tells her that it will not hurt and continues to take control of her. Karen thinks how “she might have been fleeing her body, plotting to leave it behind with Shar in order to please him and cheat him at the same time” (173) which makes her suffer psychological disembodiment as means to withstand the abuse. Shar’s abuse is portrayed as despicable as it can be, he forces her to look at him so she cannot escape what is happening, he also insults her and tells her how he wished he could set her on fire as he did to his father’s corpse.

The fact that Karen thinks she has any control in that situation, that she is “winning”, makes the effects that abuse can have on the victim’s mentality, not just her body. The cemetery serves here as a metaphor for Karen’s suffering, she is trying to leave her physical body there and escape the rape mentally, as if she were another buried body. This technique is similar to her behavior at school, staying inside the classroom and avoiding interaction, or with Jack when she kept looking at his forehead instead of his eyes.

After the argument at Synderdale, Shar leaves Karen there, probably convinced by Max, to focus on his next race at Cherry River. Max gives Karen money so she can have an abortion, believing this way he will get rid of her completely and have Shar all for himself. However, it has already been established that Karen finds it impossible to go back home, she ignores her father’s state, and she has not complied with his last order, she has not killed Shar. Unable to escape from her abuser, Karen uses the money to get to Cherry River and find him. Shar has not stopped his abuse by getting away from her, before she arrives, he gets into trouble after spending the night drinking and going to the harbor’s circus with Mitchie, Ponzi, and two girls, Marian, and Kathy. Ponzi is only there because Kathy is interested in Mitchie but cannot be seen with a black man, so once they reach the hotel room Shar kicks him out. While Ponzi complains about it and Mitchie tries to calm him down, Shar starts having sex with Kathy instead of Marian, making the girl boast about winning his interest. The scene turns dark when Shar starts talking about abusing Karen at the barn, “she didn’t feel it —she was unconscious— Why didn’t I leave her there?” (228), making him stop and start crying. Max comes to his rescue and instead of punishing Shar’s behavior, he hires a prostitute from his hotel as a pacifier.

However, the escort does not distract Shar, who finds Karen in the middle of the crowd and gains control of her again, “I’ll finish it for you this time” he says, “this is the last time!” (248). This is the last sexual encounter the pair have in the novel; it is so violent that Karen suffers a miscarriage. It is only then that Shar seems to realize the severity of his actions, he has hurt Karen physically and emotionally many times, but it is when another

human life, his own baby, is hurt that he reconsiders his blame. Cahill's idea of derivatization is important to understand Shar's abuse. He does not just objectify Karen, he wants to make her a submissive part of his sexual act, this is why he forces her to look at him, he uses her but needs her to be a participant in the abuse. Therefore, he keeps thinking about her even when he is committing sexual acts on other women, he needs her, not just a woman because she does not fight back nor escape, she is helpless.

If Shar saw women as objects to dominate sexually, he would be satisfied with Marian, Kathy, or the prostitute. But he sees Karen and goes back to her, she represents his suffering at the old cabin because she is part of his upbringing, in Eden County, she is the nearest person he has to his recently deceased father, the first man to abuse him, and to his mother, the first woman to abandon him, by abusing her Shar is taking revenge on the ones who hurt him. When he realizes he is responsible for the miscarriage he becomes his own father, or even worse, by hurting his own offspring.

Shar tries to make amends with Karen after this, but it is too late, she despises him for all his mistreatment. Shar leaves the room to take part in the fourth of July race and tells her he knew he would never live to be thirty-one, implying he plans to die. Sadly, even if Karen hates him, she has developed such a co-dependency with him that feels she will die if he does, she tries to stop him, but it is already too late. Karen sees a cockroach up in the motel's room wall, an insect she had already seen at the Synderdale hotel. Oates seems to use cockroaches as a metaphor for Karen, after everything she has suffered, she is still standing. When Max and Jerry tell her that Shar has died at the race, she tells them it was no accident. Max, who has never criticized nor avoided Shar's violent attacks on Karen, and who tried to force her to get an abortion, starts calling her a murderer.

At that moment, Karen is so broken and attached to Shar that she suffers a mental breakdown while Cherry River is destroyed by mobs after a racial fight begins at the race. Karen is almost raped again in the middle of the chaos when she leaves the motel wearing only a robe and completely wet from the shower. A group of white men find her and even though at first, they pretend to care for her telling her that she could end up being dragged off by a "nigger" they suddenly consider doing it themselves. It is only when one of them disregards her as a "real nut" and "no more'n a kid" (298) that they let her be. It is implied as if her mental state devaluates her sexual appeal, and this is the only reason they do not rape her. Here there is another example of derivatization, Karen does not fulfill what they consider a woman who can be subject to their abuse. It is more than objectification or control.

From an ecofeminist point of view, it could be said that the same way humans divide animals into different categories depending on the type of relationship they can forge with them (pets, farm animals), the products that can be obtained (meat, eggs, offspring), or even their level of ‘wilderness’; or they divide the land (forests, farms, urbanizations, resorts...); men do the same with women. Historically, there has been a tendency of treating women differently depending on the role imposed on them: wives, daughters, sexual partners, etc. Going back to Susan Hawthorne’s ideas on wilderness vs civilization, the same grading criteria are imposed on animals, land, and women. Shar hates his mother because she did not behave the way a mother is supposed to, and he treats Karen as a punching bag because he does not respect her, she is not at his level of civilization, she is just a country girl to suffer all his trauma. Shar sees her differently when she suffers the miscarriage, suddenly she is seen as almost a mother, a more civilized label that requires more respect, which is why he suddenly wants to marry her. In the novel, sexual abuse is depicted as a horrible act committed by men who think they have the right to do so.

The Revere boy, the teacher, Jack, Shar, and the men at the riot, are examples of men who have been raised in a manmade world where the lack of sexual control is understood as a result of being born a man. In the same way fighting cocks are not a real example of roosters, sexual predators are not an example of human males. Humans have tried to control nature and then use their altered outcomes as normality. An example of this in the novel appears at the end when Karen is discharged from the mental hospital she is in, her psychiatrist has a distorted version of what Karen has suffered and therefore he explains her mental problems and strange behavior, so it all makes sense. He tells Celine that it is just the result of the trauma caused by losing her lover in an accident, he never understands he has a victim of sexual, physical, mental, and verbal abuse in his hands.

5. Conclusion

To conclude this master’s final dissertation, I believe I have accomplished a thorough and detailed analysis of *With Shuddering Fall* from an ecofeminist perspective. Oates debut novel is a complex story filled with different nuances, and therefore it can be analyzed from different perspectives, among which we can find sexism, most of the women present in the novel are treated as less than men, wanted for sexual intercourse, and abused; there are also plenty of racist exhibitions, from Mitchie, who cannot even dare to walk holding hands with a white girl and is constantly called the n-word, to Vanilla Jones, Shar’s competition at

Cherry River who is blamed for his death, causing a racist riot which destroys the town; American consumerism is also present, embodied by Max's control over people and places due to his economic power, represented also in Cherry River's casinos and mafias, and the celebration of the 4th of July filled with violence; the novel can also be analyzed from a theologian point of view since Christianity's views are clear in Karen's upbringing and mentality, as well as the behavior in those around her.

The decision to analyze the story from an ecofeminist perspective came from the lack of exploration within this literary theory in the analysis of Oates' work, especially in relation with this novel. Oates's use of the rural world, a steady feature in her work, to begin and end the story, added to Karen's obsession with her father, her constant need to be acknowledged and loved by him, and the fact that he is not only authority because he is the patriarch of his family, but the farmer of his own land. At the same time, the presence of car races, mainly dominated by men, are known for polluting with the burning of fuel and the explosions of cars, which cause destruction justified only for the mere entertainment of people. Karen is abused the same way the natural world is, and it seems women, animals, and the environment exist to be taken advantage of.

As explained in this essay, this toxic perpetuation of male dominance can be understood when we consider that Western history relates to the development of Christianity, where men are closer to the image of God almighty and women are less human and more similar to nature. Religion has shaped Western thought since it has been connected from ancient times to the writing of laws and the development of education. These ideas have also shaped the way Western societies think about masculinity and femininity, to the point that we have been convinced that the sex we are born with is decisive for our behavior and capacities.

Farming and racing in the novel are representations of these sexist perspectives, believed to be activities that come naturally to males. Men are strong and powerful, and therefore they can own and work the land. At the same time, the invention and improvement of automobiles meant controlling and achieving moving great distances in a short time, and as a privilege, it was given easier access to men. This is why the races in the novel, as well in real life, are mostly done by men, who were traditionally thought to be better drivers and who had the courage and ability to risk their lives at the races.

The alarming amount of women who are abused yearly is of great concern, and it is no coincidence that the environment's status is worsening along with women's rights. Women and the environment are constantly abused, even when humanity cannot survive

without either of them. We live in a globalized world where we can reach information easily, we are given statistics about how human activity is deteriorating the environment, resulting in the risk of annihilation. However, the situation of women and the natural world worsens as time goes by. I hope that extending ecofeminism as a perspective to analyze not just literature, but the world around us can help us cultivate awareness and improve the situation we are in. Karen fights for her place in a community as well as her freedom as an individual, and we should do the same, and think about our benefit without harming our surroundings, which include other people, animals, forestation, and seas.

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