DARK WRITING IN SHORT FICTION:
Margaret Atwood, Mary Gaitskill, and Joyce Carol Oates

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When I read dark material, especially a story that reminds me of some aspect of my life, I feel privy to a secret conversation. The secrecy between the pages gives me a sense of fulfillment, as if the feelings I have about this subject or that subject are validated. At the same time, I’m fearful of relating to these dark topics, and my fear comes partly from not wanting to be stereotyped in my life or my writing—but also from knowing that if someone knows too much about a person she may become bored and want to leave.

I feel a particular affinity to Mary Gaitskill’s dark style of writing because on numerous occasions her stories have included situations and characters familiar to me. It’s often difficult for me to open up to these dark topics if I’m sharing my experiences with friends or family, but when they are in stories I enjoy, I can share them and still have those thoughts and feelings protected through the facade of the story.

In Gaitskill’s “Tiny, Smiling Daddy” a father receives a phone call from a friend telling him his daughter has written an article about being a lesbian and being estranged from her father in a national magazine. I remember reading this collection in early 2006 after being introduced to Gaitskill’s work in a creative writing class at Oregon State University. At the time I hadn’t spoken to my father since 1997, and the feelings that separation evoked—sadness, awareness, longing—stayed with me for some time. In the years I hadn’t spoken with him I had had another child, had been divorced, and was in a relationship with a woman. The parallels in the story—writing, running away,
Gaitskill’s protagonist is a man I felt I knew and one I imagined might react exactly the same as I thought my father would if I ever wrote an honest account of why we no longer kept in touch. The lost relationship was a darkness I could relate to, and the story affected me deeply.

Gaitskill’s protagonist has a series of self-justifying recollections about his daughter before he gets to the store to buy a copy of the article to read. First, he refers to his daughter when she was fourteen as “this awful kid looking ugly, acting mean, and not setting the table,” and then he feels resentment about her decision to become a lesbian: “It seemed unreasonable that she should turn out so badly after taking up so much of their time” (15).

The man is angry about his daughter going through the normal business of her teenage years, but after saying she turns out “badly” his disappointment becomes more profound as his language turns specific: “As if it weren’t enough to be sullen and dull, she turned into a lesbian” (16).

Gaitskill’s protagonist feels wronged by his daughter, even before he reads the article she wrote in the magazine. When he reads the article, he is surprised by her account of a telephone conversation they once had. Gaitskill uses the daughter’s article to show an imaginary conversation of what she could have said instead of saying nothing at all. Instead of feeling sorry, the father is bitter and says, “If that was the kind of thing she was going to say to him, he was relieved she hadn’t said it” (20).

In the end, Gaitskill’s protagonist describes his strained relationship with his own father saying, “When a father dies, he is gone; there is no tiny, smiling daddy who
appears, waving happily, in a secret pocket in your chest. Some kinds of loss are absolute” (24).

The bitterness and loss that the man feels resonated with me because I felt I could understand both the father and the daughter. The sense of fear and secrecy was there for me, recognizing myself and keeping it inside. This kind of private sharing is beneficial because I connect with someone else without exposing myself.

I. Dark Writing in General

A dark writing style can induce a lump in the throat, a quickening of the pulse, a wicked smile, a looming over the head. It can also have elements of danger, disruption of happiness, and loss of innocence. Sometimes a reader might say, “That’s too dark for me,” and not be able to cite a specific event or incident within the story. She might describe the way she feels in response to the story or a particular character, but this dark style is difficult to define. Three women who consistently create fiction that can be classified as a “dark style of writing” are Margaret Atwood, Mary Gaitskill, and Joyce Carol Oates.

The backgrounds of Atwood, Gaitskill, and Oates may offer some insight into their particular styles and techniques for creating the dark style. Atwood was born in November 18, 1939. Her father was an entomologist, and her mother was a dietitian/nutritionist. She began writing at the age of six and spent years in the backwoods of Northern Quebec with her family—giving her plenty of imaginative time (“Joyce Carol Oates Biography”). Gaitskill was born November 11, 1954. At age sixteen she ran away from home and worked as a stripper and a call girl to survive. She has written in
Harper’s Magazine about being raped (see Rothman 1). Oates was born June 16, 1938. She grew up in Lockport, New York, and lived on a farm with fruit orchards and chickens. Her childhood has been described as pastoral but not without violence and dysfunction in her family history (Nutt 1). These women have radically different upbringings, and therefore the filters through which they relay their fiction through will differ greatly.

In Gaitiskill’s story collections Because They Wanted To, Bad Behavior, and Don’t Cry, her characters are drug addicts, prostitutes, and adulterers who make their way through their lives either trying to hurt others, themselves, or both. Her settings are dead-end jobs and tiny apartments. Her word choices for summary and dialogue are gruff, sexually forward, and at times repulsive.

In Atwood’s story collections Wilderness Tips and Moral Disorder, her characters range from young to old, trying to make sense of their lives or the lives they gave up. Her settings are high-profile magazine companies, summer camps, and lodges. Her word choices for summary are elegant and sophisticated, as if the characters’ maturing is reflected in their vocabularies. Her dialogue includes diction that is curt, hurtful, and vulgar.

In Oates’s story collections Heat, and Other Stories and Haunted Tales of the Grotesque, her characters are bold and self-destructive. Her settings are upper-class neighborhoods, clothing stores, and small towns. Her word choices reflect pain and longing. Her characters are damaged, seductive, and evil.

In contrast to Gaitiskill’s work, Atwood enters into the dark gracefully, so much so that a reader might not get that “gut reaction” that comes in response to Gaitiskill’s
shocking work. However, Gaitskill skillfully uses straight talk followed up with sweet words to evoke exhilaration within the story. Oates’s stories can go either way—striking yet dismissive—she is known as “Princeton’s ‘dark lady of fiction’” (Nutt 1). Often she invokes all three style techniques and creates confusion and clarity all at once.

Atwood, Gaitskill, and Oates use their dark writing styles to deepen setting, characters, and situations. I will focus on three types of specific vehicles for making a story classified as dark: word choice, setting, and character actions (intentional and unintentional), keeping in mind each author’s personal history as it plays a significant role in her unique style.

A. Word Choice

Word choice is basic to creating mood in a story. The words to describe candy canes and sunsets are likely to be light-hearted and pleasing. Suppose now you take the same candy cane and describe it as tasteless. A tasteless candy cane might suggest that something is wrong. A sunset might be beautiful to look at, but if it becomes a dreaded sunset, then a reader must begin to wonder why does the sun going down cause dread? The main difference between Atwood’s and Gaitskill’s word choices is directness. Atwood prefers to use a combination of seemingly “normal” words and persuade the reader to view them as dark or dangerous. Gaitskill, like Oates, chooses dialogue and summary that put a reader on alert before they know what the story is about. Specifically, a handful of common words in a Gaitskill story may obviously make up a dark piece of work: degrading, exhausted, senseless sex, monsters, exploding heads. In a typical
Atwood story her choices on the surface seem standard: blankets, rabbits, fountains, baby.

Similar to both Gaitskill’s and Atwood’s stories, Oates’s stories might include words like dominant, stab of satisfaction, alliance, golden couple, which are a mix of seemingly normal versus abnormal. All three authors use their dark writing style to create engaging stories.

In Moral Disorder Atwood’s word choices are ordinary and subtle, so that the reader may not immediately realize she is in dark territory. “The Art of Cooking and Serving” shows how the words Atwood chooses can take ordinary situations and create a feeling of gloom. Here an eleven-year-old is knitting for her unborn brother or sister. Atwood chooses her words carefully to stay close to the protagonist’s feelings of distress and how she attempts to soothe herself regarding her mother’s condition: “I was knitting this layette because my mother was expecting. I avoided the word pregnant, as did others: pregnant was a blunt, bulgy, pendulous word, it weighed you down to think about it” (12).

Even though Atwood’s protagonist is using another word to describe her mother’s condition—expecting—she is thinking about why the word pregnant bothers her. This is bringing her deeper into the darkness. She is trying so hard to avoid her mother’s pregnancy that she finds herself listing what it makes her think of, revealing to the reader that she is not looking forward to the baby but that the entire process is something she’d rather not have to go through. Atwood’s protagonist also makes a point to let the reader know that everyone feels the way she does, using the word others to put herself in a group so she is not alone.
Atwood’s dark style relies on making the ordinary strange. In the above passage, the situation is relatively normal but the character creates an inner monologue that makes her mother’s pregnancy something that will weigh her down literally and figuratively. That Atwood has been inspired by myths and fairy tales may explain her approach with word choice in this story. She makes the normal seem like fantasy by using an eleven-year-old girl to be afraid of the word *pregnancy.*

In the beginning of Gaitskill’s “Turgor” a woman who has just found out that an old sex partner has died of a drug overdose is asked how she is by a deli clerk. This brings a vivid, dark memory to the mind of the main character. In the following passage, Gaitskill uses negative, highly charged, sexual comments about a man her protagonist once slept with. It’s especially important that some of these words taken out of the context of the story still carry their own dark meanings because this paints a particular picture to begin with:

...but he was essentially an absurdly cruel, absurdly unhappy person, and I thought that in the end, he was probably quite relieved to go. I had not seen him in ten years, and our association had been pornographic, loveless, and stupid. We had had certain bright moments of camaraderie and high jinks, but none of it justified the feelings I’d had for him. Even now he occasionally appears in my dreams—loving and tender, smiling as he hands me, variously, a candy bar, a brightly striped glass ball, a strawberry scented candle. (191)

From Gaitskill’s belittling the relationship by describing it as pornographic, loveless, and stupid, a reader understands this is a dark story. However, as she moves down to her character’s dreams, the descriptions become positive, shiny, and sweet-
smelling. This juxtaposition between positive and negative word choices pulls the reader from one extreme to the other. Readers are in a state of uncertainty with the language—should they trust the author? Should they not? In the end, Gaitskill relies on more subtle words, like Atwood, to keep the uncertainty lingering:

From the garden, I heard one of my neighbors describe his bonnet as “robin’s-egg blue.” He must’ve shown it to the other neighbor, because I heard a second voice say, “Oh it’s so special.” He was being sarcastic, but he also meant it. (201)

We end in a garden with the woman eavesdropping on her neighbors. In general, a garden is a nice place to be with life growing, and then we have eavesdropping, which grows into gossip and sometimes hard feelings, and the woman is taking in both the garden and the eavesdropping as good and bad. The bonnet is an image of youth and it is described as “robin’s-egg blue.” Both of these examples are nothing out of the ordinary, but one neighbor says how “special” it is and the woman knows that he is being sarcastic and sincere at once. The contrast between the beginning and the end of the story and the words used that range from repulsive to regular create Gaitskill’s dark writing style and give a cushion to her blunt words.

Gaitskill discusses her writing style in an interview with Emily McLaughlin at Fiction Writer’s Review. When asked if she remembers writing initial drafts and where she was emotionally at the time, she says she doesn’t remember the stories specifically, but she is aware that they “Show someone who is aware of style, and most students are not. Literary style is quite important to me; it’s not superficial, it’s the means through which your content becomes known. I clearly had a sense of style and was trying to work with it” (1).
She does not address her emotions except to say, “It was a terrible time.”

Gaitskill’s awareness of style and knowledge that style leads to familiarity of work gives her the ability to delve into dangerous, grotesque language, places, and characters, allowing the reader to have a more emotional response. When a reader is affected emotionally, the story will have much more meaning and reveal truths about their own lives.

Identifying with stories that are unusual situations, characters, or language opens the question of why some people are drawn to the “dark style” and why some people are repelled. We’ve shown examples of word choice to explore how using everyday words can have a layered effect of good and bad or words that are negative can be paired with positive, but the preference of readers and what resonates for them emotionally is more complicated than the technical aspect of writing.

Oates attempts to make sense of the feelings or reasoning behind the dark in the afterword in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*:

What is the “grotesque”—and what is “horror”—in art? And why do these seemingly repellent states of mind possess for some, an abiding attraction?

I take as the most profound mystery of our human experience the fact that, though we each exist subjectively, and know the world only through the prism of self, this “subjectivity” is inaccessible, thus unreal, and mysterious, to others. And the obverse—all others are, in the deepest sense, strangers. (303)

Oates asks the question why is there such an attraction to this subject matter, which seems similar to my asking what is the definition of “dark writing?” Aside from concrete answers, when we look at what attracts us to dark, horrible stories, there is this
“mystery of our human experience” that Oates describes, which brings curiosity and need to people. Our shared experiences help people identify with others, and the knowing or familiarity of a situation may be where darkness comes because we can empathize and understand the pain.

B. Character Actions: Intentional and Unintentional

Character actions can be both intentional and unintentional in any story. An example of an intentional character action would be someone who makes a conscious decision to hurt or harm another character. An example of an unintentional character action would be someone who hurts or harms another character unconsciously. The harm can be physical or mental.

Dark characters can inhabit stories in a myriad ways to bring an emotional response to the reader. A character may be similar to an acquaintance, a family member or a dear friend. If a reader feels particularly familiar with an evil or unkind character, this could cause them to dislike the story.

Atwood’s “Hairball” is the account of a woman, Kat, who gets an ovarian cyst removed and decides to keep it in a jar in her living room. Her married boyfriend, Gerald, is disgusted by the cyst and wants Kat to throw it away. The two of them met when Gerald hired Kat for a position at a fashion magazine. When Kat returns to work, a week early after the removal surgery, Gerald tells her she is being fired and he is taking her position. She arrives home to an invitation to a party that Gerald’s wife is having. Kat decides to remove the cyst from its jar, powder it with cocoa, place it among truffles, and have it delivered in a fancy bag with a note revealing their affair.
This is a character who intentionally tries to hurt her lover and his wife and in the process will probably hurt herself because he will most likely figure out that she has sent her cyst to be eaten by his wife. This will most likely cause some sort of retaliation, but we do not know because the story ends before anything else happens. Kat is aware of her actions, and we see her predict the trouble she has caused in the second to last paragraph:

When evening has fallen and the party must be in full swing, she calls a delivery taxi. Cheryl will not distrust anything that arrives in such an expensive bag. She will open it in public in front of everyone. There will be distress, there will be questions. Secrets will be unearthed. There will be pain. After that, everything will go way too far. (47)

What makes this passage so gruesome is the fact that Kat wants things to go wrong. She had an intentional affair with a married man, whom she thought to be responsible for her being fired. Now she is ready to wreak havoc on her former lover and his wife.

Atwood’s main character in this story purposefully tries to hurt another character. The pain she wishes to inflict is greater than that suffered by any of Gaitskill’s characters. Character actions are where Atwood uses the dark as blatantly as Gaitskill uses her words.

In Gaitskill’s “The Girl on the Plane” a man named John almost misses his flight. A thirty-year-old woman comes and sits next to him moments later. She reminds him of a college-aged girl he knew when he lived in Coate, Minnesota. To his surprise, the woman on the plane is also from Coate, Minnesota. This coincidence strikes him in a way he cannot explain and causes him to react unconsciously, but he does not let the woman
know his inner thoughts until it is too late. The girl on the plane confides to him that she is an alcoholic who no longer drinks. Because John is reminded more and more of the girl he once knew, he ends up telling the woman next to him that he raped a girl when he lived in Minnesota.

John’s character action is unintentional because he does not mean to give this information to the girl next to him. It almost seems to be forced out of himself as he grabs the woman’s hand: “He reached out to gently pat her hand, to reassure her that he wasn’t a nut, but instead he grabbed it and held it. “If you want to talk about mistakes—shit, I raped somebody. Somebody I liked” (135).

John is angry with an airline employee in the beginning because the employee says, “You’re a little late for a seat assignment . . . I hope you can get on board before it pulls away” (121). Then he gets annoyed that the woman next to him offers personal information about herself to a stranger on a plane, but he is not the type to give his personal information. This character is trying to make up for something he feels guilt for from his past. He had no intention of boarding a plane and telling anyone about the rape he committed.

This example differs from the Atwood piece because Gaitskill’s protagonist, even as he recalls the rape scene, seems removed from both situations. John’s unintentional actions are what make his character dark. He continues to find himself in these weary situations—unintentional rape and offending a woman on a plane—without ever understanding that he might be the cause of his anger and unhappiness. Atwood’s protagonist makes decisions to do things and then she does them, i.e., sending her cyst wrapped as a truffle.
The characters in Oates’s “Heat,” Rhea and Rhoda, are killed by a mentally challenged neighborhood man. The man is convicted and the town blames him, but it is through the woman narrating, remembering the incident, that the twins seem guiltier than the man who kills them:

Sometimes they were serious and sometimes, remembering, they shrieked and laughed like they were being killed. They stole things out of desks and lockers but if you caught them they’d hand them right back; it was like a game. (142)

In contrast, when she recalls the man, he seems innocent compared to the twins: “She said none of it was his fault in his heart, he wasn’t the kind of boy to injure an animal; he loved kittens especially and was a good sweet obedient boy and religious too” (151).

The man who murders the twins seems to be the unintentional character not only because he is mentally challenged, but because of the fact that even after the murder he is unaware of any harm he has done. On the other hand, because the twins are remembered as conniving thieves, it seems they may have intentionally caused their own demise.

C. Setting

Setting refers to the physical place that characters in a story inhabit. Where the character lives, works, or spends most of his or her time can be a clear indicator of dark writing. Atwood and Gaitskill use very different approaches with setting. Gaitskill is more concrete—seedy apartments or smelly bars. Atwood’s protagonists are less likely to be in physically dark places, as Gaitskill’s, but they often use imagination to put themselves in difficult situations. Oates’s settings are a combination of both Gaitskill’s
and Atwood’s. She places characters in dark situations with disturbing thoughts in most stories.

Settings in Atwood’s, Gaitskill’s, and Oates’s real life may contribute to their different styles. As mentioned earlier, Atwood grew up in an environment where she was able to use her imagination to fill her time growing up. Playing make-believe with her siblings may have shaped some of the places she uses in her stories. In one *Guardian* interview she states that she and her older brother had a whole galaxy going:

Our superheroes were flying rabbits. His came fully equipped with spaceships and weaponry. My rabbits were more frivolous. They were keen on balloons and did a lot of twirling about in the air. The pictures I have of them [which she’s kept] show these rather eerie smiles. (McCrum 1).

Here she reveals that even in childhood games as she played with “frivolous rabbits” and “balloons” the background of the galaxy suggests more is happening in this scene. As in the eleven-year-old who deems the word *pregnant* to be a dirty word, these rabbits with their “eerie” smiles mean more than simply an imagined place. Her unusual, spacious landscape has shaped her “dark style.”

Atwood’s “The Other Place” begins with an imagined setting: “I had an image of myself trudging along a dusty or lumpy or ice-covered road, carrying a little bundle on a stick, like the hobos in comic books. But that was much too droll” (77).

Atwood’s protagonist places herself in a dark space, but because it is imagined, she has the ability to make her surroundings better or worse than they are in reality. She tells us that in truth, she didn’t have anywhere to be, so she goes by train or airplane to new places frequently fearing any kind of stability or consistency that might come from
living or rooting in one place. Then, instead of staying in the present, she delves back into imagination:

I would welcome each new dislocation, unpack my few belongings with alacrity and even joy, then set out to explore the neighborhood or district or city and learn its ways; but soon enough I’d begin to imagine what I’d become if I stayed in that place forever. Here, a stringy-haired intellectual, pasty-faced, humorless, and morbid; there, a self-satisfied matron, shut up in a cage of a house that would not be recognized as a cage until it was too late. (78)

Atwood’s protagonist is resistant to her setting—out casting her from any one particular place—but by referring to these places as a dislocation she puts a negative spin on the story. This unsettled sense of place, whether it is in the protagonist’s mind or the physical place, brings Atwood’s dark style forward. The imagination plays a large part because Atwood’s protagonist can’t help but think of the worst situation no matter if she is “here” or “there.” Any place will end up being somewhere she does not want to be.

Deeper into the *Guardian* interview, Atwood lends more insight into her childhood and why setting is important to create a dark mood in a story. “I grew up in the woods. Don’t even think rural. That implies farms. No, we’re talking—a dramatic downshift in tone—in the woods. A settlement of about six houses [a research station] with no access by car. No electricity. No running water” (McCrum 2). She refers to her childhood as this place of emptiness, a place lacking any of the standard amenities that an average human may have, but she remains positive about having to use her imagination with her family to make her existence fulfilling.
Gaitskill’s sense of place may also be a reflection of her own difficulties as a runaway teenager who had to find work to survive the streets. However, over time, Gaitskill has thought she shouldn’t have been so forthcoming with her background. In a *Fiction Writer Review* interview she states, “I think it would have been better if I had not stated it [on being a stripper when she was younger]. I think it would’ve been fine to talk about as time went on” (McLaughlin 2). We know Gaitskill holds writing style in high regard. The reason she may have been concerned with giving too much personal information is that the information might have swayed readers’ opinions of the stories, rather than the writing style. Ultimately she admits, “Now, it’s almost become accepted. But at the time, it [stripping] was still a bit taboo. Yet I knew so many women and girls who did things like that so I didn’t think it should be this horrific secret” (McLaughlin 3). Gaitskill may be writing about these dark places as a way to bring things into the light. Although they seem dark for the average person, she wants them to become as familiar as she knows her writing style has become.

Gaitskill’s reason for familiarity in style and reality may be because our experiences as humans shape our story worlds as well as the real world. In an interview with Matthew Sharpe, she admits that in her youth, “I was indignant about things—it was the typical teenager sense of ‘things are wrong in the world and I must say something’” (1). Gaitskill seems to be admitting that her stories were a way to bring up uncomfortable topics and bring them to those who either avoided them or refused to acknowledge them.

In Gaitskill’s “A Romantic Weekend” the main character, Beth, is waiting on the corner of a street for a man she likes to meet her. The man thinks Beth is similar to
another damaged girl that he had a sexual relationship with. He plans to have the same
demeaning relationship with Beth:

When she arrived at the corner he wasn’t there. She stood against a building,
trying to arrange her body in the least repulsive configuration possible. Her
discomfort mounted. She crossed the street and stood on the other corner. It
seemed as though everyone who walked by was eating. A large, distracted
businessman went by holding a half-eaten hot dog. Two girls passed, sharing
cashews from a white bag. The eating added to her sense that the world was
disorderly and unbeautiful. She became acutely aware of the garbage on the street.
The wind stirred it; a candy wrapper waved forlornly from its trapped position in
the mesh of a jammed public wastebasket. This was all wrong, all horrible. (27)

The dark tone of the setting is created with Beth arriving first, noting the man
“wasn’t there.” By telling who is missing from the setting, the reader gets a sense of
anguish for Beth, and the setting becomes a place of emptiness. Gaitskill uses the
surrounding people and items on the street to add to Beth’s distress at waiting on a street
corner. Beth is uncomfortable with eating, a basic need, and these foods become beacons
of negativity—hot dogs and cashews.

Oates’s background includes attending the “same one-room schoolhouse as her
mother” and receiving a typewriter for her fourteenth birthday, which sparked her
writing. Amy Ellis Nutt of The Star-Ledger states, “Oates draws on the geography around
her to inform her writing” (2). The places she has taught are similar to the settings in her
stories. Oates uses the familiarity of a place where she has lived and then delves into the
darkness using place first to position the characters, setting them up to fall into the darkness.

In “Thanksgiving,” Oates, like Gaitskill, uses food references to create a dark tone. A teenage girl and her father drive into town to buy groceries at the store for the holiday. The mother, who normally takes care of the shopping, is not available because of an unexplained mental illness. On the drive into town the father makes a wrong turn and when they arrive to the store the scene is grim:

The smell of smoke and scorch was strong here, you could see that the front of the store was blackened and the plate glass windows that ran the length of it had plywood inserts here and there. The poster advertising special bargains BACON BANANAS TURKEY CRANBERRY MIX EGGS PORTERHOUSE STEAK had begun to peel off the glass and the building itself looked smaller, not as high, as if the roof was sinking in. (222)

The combination of the foul smell, a drooping rooftop, and a little girl and her father who don’t have any idea how the mother shops for any occasion makes this setting uneasy at first glance. We’ve begun with a situation that comes with its own dark connotations—a family afraid of losing a loved one to an illness. The sign in the window of different foods in capital letters is shouting as if in warning, but these are regular foods that have now become scary. The characters have no choice but to go inside because to these characters, gathering groceries for Thanksgiving dinner might change the state of the mother.

When the setting begins to crumble and the grocery store becomes a source of danger, we realize these characters are not just losing their mother, but their actual lives
are in jeopardy because the food available is rancid. “I squatted on my haunches breathing in little steamy spurts examining eggs, taking a good egg, or anyway what looked like a good egg, from one carton and putting it in another” (227).

Oates’s protagonist is willing to go through rotting eggs and expired turkeys to please her father and the hope of saving her mother. The setting of the grocery store becomes a source of possible death, yet we know the groceries will come home with them, making their house more dangerous with the eventuality of illness from both the food and the mother.

In an interview in the New York Times, Oates is asked why she “finds violence so alluring as a literary subject?” Her response is simple—“I consider tragedy the highest form of art” (Solomon 1). Prior to the interview her husband of many years died unexpectedly—not violently, but still tragically—so the truth behind her preference of art is ironic. However, it may be that she wouldn’t have been able to give such a straightforward answer regarding tragedy if it hadn’t been part of her life and become familiar to her. This makes Oates’s earlier statement about the “mystery of our human experience” clearer both because she is older and has more experience to relate to and because her definition of “mystery” may change now that she knows more about tragedy.

Since searching for a definition of a “dark writing style,” and working with Gaitskill’s, Atwood’s, Oates’s collections, it is apparent that using words, characters, and places is a concrete way to describe the “dark” style. The more difficult task of understanding why some people enjoy and others withdraw from “dark writing” cannot be answered simply. It is specific to each person—experience, frame of mind, preference.
When I asked my mentor, David Huddle, a short story writer, essayist, and poet, to give an explanation of how a “dark writing style” makes him feel, he responded without hesitation:

When I’ve encountered something in the dark style—that has artistic merit—it stays with me for days, weeks, months, even years. I still will call up the movie Dead Man Walking and grapple with it. More recently it’s been Maile Meloy’s Both Ways Is The Only Way I Want It and Elizabeth Strout’s Olive Kittredge. And I confess that some of the remembering, thinking, and feeling that comes to me is oppressive or antagonistic. But much of what draws me to this material is that it gives me pleasure with its vivid truth and sometimes with its dark humor. I’ll be thinking about the scenes of lying and domestic betrayal that are in Meloy’s work and the despair that Strout walks me into with her stories. And as I hold those scenes in mind, it’s almost as if my brain generates some kind of juice to help me move out from under the bad news of those narratives. I need both to accept and to move beyond the oppression and the antagonism. (1)

Huddle’s honest and straightforward feelings regarding this style of writing gives more than a mere definition of “dark writing”; it offers a way to accept and process the stories we encounter every day in our own lives. I know for me, the use of dark writing in stories through content or technique has helped me move through my thoughts regarding my father in a way that I feel is beneficial to my well-being and my writing life.
Works Cited


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