

Visual Narrative of Self-Identity and the American Dream in *Them*

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Abstract

Joyce Carol Oates is an American author and recipient of many prestigious literary awards, including the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Humanities Medal. One of her most famous novels is *Them*, which was first published in 1969. *Them* is a masterpiece by Joyce Carol Oates, which won the National Book Award in 1970. This candid work not only records and memories, but also reveals her reflections on some issues. This paper focuses on the visual narrative of photographic symbolism and the shattered dreams of individuals in social riots, revealing Oates' approach to the historical events that occurred in Detroit, USA, in the 1960s, and the struggles of the lower-class families and individuals in Detroit at that time, and their subsequent considerations on social issues and race, as well as the root of some of her creative ideas.

Keywords

Self-Identity, Visual, Culture, American Dream

1. Introduction

Self-identity in Oates's novels reveals diverse paths of realization—not only including various narrative constructions of self-narration, others' narration, and societal narration of characters, but also demonstrating the ethical significance of characters attaining self-identity recognition, ethical exchange, and existential transcendence through the mediation of narratives. Specifically, characters' self-narration is an important source of their self-identity, manifested as the constructiveness of memory narration, and the close association of narrative identity with the certainty, possibility, and identity of the self. The generation of others' narration has important implications for transforming self-ethical concepts, resolving personal ethical dilemmas, and conducting ethical communica-

tion. The dialectical relationship between the social narrative of characters and individual narratives is reflected in the rewriting of social narratives, such as racial equality, survival beyond boundaries, and social justice, through narration.

“Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds” by Dorothy Holland, William LaChicotte Jr., Debra Skinner, and Carole Cain outlines the relationship between self-identity and the surrounding culture, arguing that self-identity is actively formed in relation to cultural worlds. This provides an essential link between self-identity and the American Dream, a prominent cultural narrative in the United States. “The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation” by Jim Cullen delves into the evolution and influence of the American Dream concept, providing historical context and cultural meaning. Understanding the idea can deepen the analysis of how the American Dream shapes or interacts with self-identity. “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” by Benedict Anderson influential work discusses how large groups of people can identify and imagine themselves as part of a singular community, despite never meeting most of its other members. This perspective can help explore the collective identity that the American Dream promotes and its influence on personal self-identity. “Self-Identity: Personal and Socio-Cultural” by Amrita Pande discusses the socio-cultural dimensions of self-identity, examining how personal identities are shaped by their socio-cultural contexts. This perspective could offer insights into how self-identity is constructed and performed within the context of the American Dream. “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald novel isn’t an academic text, but its exploration of the American Dream and its impact on individual identities is a cultural touchstone. The book serves as a narrative examination of the allure and pitfalls of the American Dream, providing a critical cultural context.

As a keen social observer, Oates recognized the ethical function and power of visual narrative in social life, weaving the infinite possibilities emanating from narration into each of her stories, thus forming a unique narrative ethical method of realizing character self-identity construction, ethical communication, and social survival.

Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher, creatively established the narrative of self-identity construction relationship between ethics, narrative, and subject self, as well as the coherence among the three components of ethical goal concepts—personal, interpersonal, and social. This provides a theoretical foundation and structural framework for the visual narrative of self-identity study of characters in Oates’s novels and the organic connection between character narratives and ethical purposes. Meanwhile, the research in post-classical narratology, especially narrative of visual culture—on the contextual function and meaning-production function of narratives (Hoogland, 2014: p. 94), provides an analytical basis for the detailed depiction of character self-identity in Oates’s novels.

Them is a powerful and provocative novel that explores the complexities of poverty, violence, and identity in mid-twentieth century America (Creighton, 1992: p. 87). Oates is a masterful storyteller who creates vivid and compelling

characters and a richly detailed setting. The novel is both a commentary on the social and economic conditions of the time and a deeply personal exploration of the lives of the Wendell family. The novel follows the lives of the Wendell family, primarily Loretta, a young mother struggling to provide for her two children, and Maureen, Loretta's teenage daughter who is navigating the dangerous streets of Detroit in the 1960s. Jules Wendell's struggle with identity crisis and self-reconstruction in modern society is vividly manifested. Initially, he wholeheartedly embraced the "American Dream" believing that success was just a product of diligence and determination. However, the divides of social class and the unpredictable nature of fate shattered his dreams, plunging him into confusion. His bewilderment and sense of helplessness are poignantly reflected in his letters to his mother, Loretta.

The article combining the related research of narratology, philosophy, and visual culture under the theoretical framework of visual narrative, demonstrates the visual narrative method of character study in Oates's novel *Them* and offers a new research direction for the development of visual narrative. It will explore how the photographs and visual storytelling in the novel reveal the themes of self-identity and the American Dream and analyze their significance and impact.

2. Mirroring Self-Identity of 1950s American City Immigrants

Oates' vivid descriptions of the Wendell's bleak living conditions in a dilapidated house in a poverty-stricken neighborhood set the stage for the novel's exploration of the American Dream. Through the Wendell family's struggles, Oates exposes the harsh realities of poverty in America and the difficult choices that people in such situations must make. Oates also explores the intersection of poverty and race, with the Wendell's being white and living in a predominantly black neighborhood. This leads to tension and conflict between the Wendell's and their neighbors, highlighting the systemic racism that exists in America and its impact on people's lives.

Another prominent theme in the novel is the cycle of violence that plagues the Wendell family. The novel is filled with instances of physical and emotional violence, from Loretta's abusive husband to Maureen's encounters with dangerous men on the streets. Oates suggests that violence is a cyclical phenomenon, with the violence that Loretta and Maureen experience being a result of the violence they have experienced in the past. This theme is further explored through the character of Jules, a Vietnam veteran who struggles with PTSD and becomes increasingly violent throughout the novel.

Despite the bleak subject matter, there are moments of hope and joy in the novel. For example, Maureen's budding romance with a young man named Luther provides a glimmer of hope amid the violence and poverty that surrounds her. However, these moments of joy are fleeting, and the novel ultimately ends on a somber note.

In novel *Them*, the concept of the American Dream is explored through the lives of the characters in the story. The American Dream is a popular ideology that has existed for centuries, and many people believe it to be the foundation of the American way of life. This dream is often associated with the idea that anyone, regardless of their background, can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. However, the American Dream may be a complex and challenging idea. The novel “Them” highlights the struggles and challenges that many people face in pursuing the American Dream, as well as the important role that self-concept plays in this pursuit.

Oates explores the American Dream through the experiences of a white family living in Detroit in the 1950s. The novel reveals the struggles and sacrifices made by the Wendell’s family as they try to achieve the American Dream. Through the characters of Loretta, Jules, and Maureen, Oates illustrates the complex and often painful reality of the American Dream for white Americans during this era.

One of the central themes in *Them* is the pursuit of material success as a means of achieving the American Dream. Loretta, the protagonist, is determined to rise above her impoverished background and provide a better life for herself and her family. She dreams of owning a home, having a stable job, and being able to provide her children with everything they need. However, her dreams are repeatedly dashed by the harsh realities of life in Detroit. She is unable to find a stable job and is forced to rely on welfare to support her family. Her dream of owning a home is also shattered when she discovers that the only way to afford it is to take on a high-interest mortgage that she cannot afford to repay.

Jules, Loretta’s husband, also embodies the pursuit of the American Dream. He is a hard-working man who is determined to provide for his family. However, his efforts are constantly undermined by the harsh realities of life in Detroit. He is repeatedly laid off from his factory job and is forced to take on low-paying and dangerous work to make ends meet. Despite his hard work, Jules is never able to achieve the financial stability he desires. Yet, Jules Wendell did not succumb to the tragic fate of the men in his family—ending life in anger and fear. Instead, he firmly believed in his ability to shape his destiny and maintained a resilient hope for life. Even though his life may have been filled with turmoil and fragmentation, his spirit remained intact, buoyed by hope. This is the value that the author, Oates, sought to convey to readers through the character of Jules. The main storyline of Jules’s tale is his spiritual endeavor—striving for freedom, breaking through oppression, and continually improving himself. Even if this kind of perfection is patchwork and flawed, it ultimately represents a form of spiritual perfection.

The character of Maureen, Loretta’s daughter, also illustrates the harsh reality of the American Dream. Maureen is a bright and ambitious young woman who dreams of going to college and becoming a writer. However, her dreams are repeatedly dashed by the harsh realities of life in Detroit. She is forced to drop out of school and take on low-paying jobs in order to help support her family. Her dreams of becoming a writer are also undermined by the racist and sexist atti-

tudes of the time, which make it difficult for her to find work and be taken seriously.

Oates once again explores the question of whether literature and art can give life some meaning, prompting us to reflect deeply: which one is more real, the life depicted in art or our actual lives? Oates reveals that in the process of creating “They,” she has always considered the issue of an artist’s responsibility when characterizing the roles. The characters in “They” are unfortunate, but the most unfortunate thing is that they are living in desperation and believe that what they can grasp by any means is everything, which may not amount to anything in the eyes of others. This raises the question of values, or what we call “realm.” While the tragic ending of the characters in the novel is undoubtedly due to social reasons, the fundamental reason is their lack of self-awareness. They find it difficult to find their place and maintain a calm mentality in a modern society overflowing with material desires. Therefore, in terms of the theme of creation, “They” is positively oriented.

3. Visual Narrative of the Self-Identity in Detroit Riot

Detroit is a city where Oates has lived for many years and an important background for many of her works. From the perspective of photo storytelling, the novel “Them” presents the racial conflict in Detroit vividly and foresightedly. Oates’ photo storytelling of Detroit portrays a city dominated by black people with inclusiveness and explores issues such as how black and white people gradually live together harmoniously, demonstrating the state of national identity and inclusiveness in one. Like Oates’ other works, the novel is easy to understand and controversial, and she hides the deep meaning she wants to express under the photo narrative of the novel.

The depiction of the urban landscape is one of the important means of expressing the self-identity and self-construction as well as American Dream in the novel. Against the backdrop of the 1967 Detroit riots, which focuses on the white working-class Wendell family and tells a series of tragic stories that occurred in Detroit, Michigan, the novel presents “the direct involvement of individual identity consciousness in the cause and subsequent effects of the riots.” (Severin, 1986: p. 45). At the same time, Oates uses literary imagination and historical compilation techniques to reveal the inherent relationship between the politics of the people and racism in Northern cities in the 1960s, highlighting the development and changes of racial conflicts and the plight of African Americans in Detroit.

One visual narrative that captures the novel’s themes is the image of the city of Detroit itself. Detroit city, as a powerful metaphor, represents the characters’ own struggles as they try to navigate a world that is often hostile and unforgiving. Through their struggles, the characters ultimately come to a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them, as they strive to realize their own potential. Oates vividly portrays a city in decline, with abandoned buildings and factories threatening the characters. This city symbolizes the characters’

struggle to find their place in a changing world. The abandoned buildings and factories represent the characters' sense of loss and displacement as they struggle to adapt to the new reality.

Another visual narrative is the image of the Wendell family itself. This family is a microcosm of a larger society, with each member struggling to find their identity and place in the world. Mother Loretta represents the upward mobility of the traditional American Dream, working hard to provide for her family and give her children a better life. Father Howard, a World War II veteran, struggles with alcoholism and cannot adapt to the changing society around him.

The children, Jules and Maureen, represent the next generation, as they strive to find their own identities in a rapidly changing world. Jules is a talented musician, dreaming of success, while Maureen is a smart young student, working to find her place in a society that often underestimates women.

The use of photography in novels provides rich material for philosophical analysis. The use of photographic images in literature raises questions about the relationship between visual images and language, the nature of representation, and how images shape our understanding of the world.

Roland Barthes proposed the most notable philosophical analysis of photography in his book "Camera Lucida" (Barthes, 1981). Barthes explored the essence of photography and its ability to evoke emotions and memories in the viewer. He believed that photographs are a unique form of representation, capturing moments in time and preserving them permanently. "Barthes distinguished between two elements of a photograph" (Rose, 2016: p. 34): *studium*, which refers to the general cultural and historical background of the image, and *punctum*, which is the specific detail that evokes an emotional response from the viewer.

Susan Sontag critically analyzed the role of photography in modern culture in her book *On Photography*. Sontag believed that photography could be used to manipulate our perceptions and beliefs, and that they are often used as a means of social control (Sontag, 1979: p. 65). She pointed out that the proliferation of photographic images in our society has led to a visual saturation, where we are inundated with images designed to elicit specific responses.

Walter Benjamin examined how photography and other mass media have changed our relationship with art and culture in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Roberts, 1983). Benjamin believed that the mechanical reproduction of images led to the disappearance of the unique aura that surrounded works of art. He believed that the mass production of images created a new form of cultural expression that was detached from the unique qualities of original art. Philosophical analyses of photography in novels can help us understand more deeply how images shape our understanding of the world. By examining the nature of representation, the emotional impact of visual images, and the relationship between images and language, philosophers can help us better appreciate the complexity and subtleties of the medium of photography.

When discussing the role of African Americans in American literature, Toni Morrison once said, “African Americans have served as proxies and instigators,” (FitzGerald, 1993: pp. 669-687) while also pointing out that “through them, Americans have become aware that they were not enslaved, but free; not excluded, but satisfied; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not without history, but steeped in it; not cursed, but innocent; not blind, fortuitous evolution, but destiny gradually realized.” Similarly, the emotional experiences of trauma and identity dissolution among non-black groups can also be presented through interactions with African Americans.

As critic Walter G. comments, “The life in Detroit portrayed in *Them* is harsh, ruthless, and fearful. This is why Jules shouts to burn down the city.” The absurd living conditions of them stem from a severe and hostile environment. Over industrialization and population growth have squeezed people in the “Motor City” of Detroit, making it difficult for them to maintain a safe and comfortable distance from each other. “The half-house they lived in was so crowded” (Oates, 1969: p. 65); “On Saturdays, because it was too noisy, Maureen had to leave the house and go to a library, where it was very quiet. The library was quiet, and home should be like this” (Oates, 1969: p. 136); “Smoke rolled out from many places, rising up and gently floating over the Ambassador Bridge” (Oates, 1969: p. 103). The polluted, noisy, crowded, and chaotic life exceeded people’s mental capacity, making them sensitive, fragile, manic, and even deranged, and their behavior manifested in absurdity. “They” are also very dissatisfied with their living environment, and they have repeatedly tried to pursue a comfortable, fresh, and peaceful living environment. Lolita moved repeatedly in an attempt to obtain a peaceful space, young Jules also “yearned for a piece of barren land in the American West, with a golden sky and perhaps golden fields”, (Oates, 1969: p. 104) and Maureen had to hide in the library to escape the chaotic living environment, but all their attempts to save themselves ended in failure. This also highlights the harsh living environment of *Them*.

Compared to the harsh natural environment, the social environment in which they live is even more distressing. Lack of education, fights and brawls, police brutality, proliferation of firearms, prostitution, murder, rape, racial conflicts, and various other social ills fill the lives of the slum dwellers: “A group of black kids circled around two boys who were fighting, cheering... One boy had a knife, and the other was hitting him with his jacket” (Oates, 1969: pp. 450-451); Lorreta’s father was sent to a mental hospital for no clear reason; the patients in the welfare hospital where Blake lived were all used as guinea pigs for a new anti-cancer drug; Lorreta’s best friend encouraged her to become a prostitute; people talked enthusiastically about “a man who was beaten so badly that his eyeballs popped out, and they called it ‘good stuff’” Oates (1969: p. 85). In such a bleak, turbulent, disorderly, and violent social environment, people have completely lost their sense of security. “They” are constantly fearful and anxious, always on guard against potential dangers. For example, after school, Maureen was extremely careful about which route to take (Oates, 1969: p. 172). Their highly

tense nerves make “them” even more manic and depressed, and their behavior becomes more absurd.

The absurdity portrayed in *Them* is deeply unsettling, leaving readers in a state of shock and horror. Oates not only confronts the absurd fate of “them,” but also depicts the absurd situations they face and their true feelings about them. She uses a dramatic and absurd layout to warn about life, pay attention to people’s fates, and explore the state of human existence, making people aware that their fellow beings have lost their personalities and dignity under adverse conditions, performing a ridiculous life that only onlookers can perceive. The absurd life of “them” also reflects the author’s pursuit of reflecting the most authentic society, mercilessly exposing the scars of a seemingly prosperous and democratic country. The exposure of scars may be painful, but it can draw attention and be treated in time to prevent it from worsening. As Oates emphasizes, “no matter how terrible the narration is, the value of the work lies in the fact that ‘they’ survive.” The characters in the novel continue to live, affirming the reality of human existence and the greatness of human vitality.

4. Conclusion

In concluding our study on the visual narrative of self-identity and the American Dream in “Them”, we underscored the necessity of integrating the interpretation of literary works within their broader social reality. This perspective provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of these works, not just as individual narratives, but as pieces of a larger societal fabric, reflecting and influencing cultural ideals, such as the American Dream. Building on this conclusion, several future research avenues can be proposed to deepen and broaden our understanding of the complex relationship between literature, self-identity, and social reality. One significant direction would be to explore the intersectionality of self-identity within these narratives, delving into how factors such as race, gender, and class influence and interact with the themes of the American Dream. This would add a layer of complexity to our understanding and interpretation of such narratives. Another valuable study could take the form of a comparative literature approach, investigating different literary works exploring similar themes. By juxtaposing “Them” with other novels from diverse periods or social backgrounds, new insights may be revealed about the representation of self-identity and the American Dream in American literature. The multimodal analysis, considering other sensory modalities in addition to the visual narrative, could offer new perspectives on the conveyance of themes like self-identity and the American Dream in literature and its adaptations.

Further, studying the cultural impact of works like “Them” can shed light on their role in shaping perceptions of the American Dream and self-identity, providing a reflection of the narratives’ ripple effect in society. A historical analysis situating “Them” and similar works within their temporal context can illuminate the evolution of the interpretation of self-identity and the American Dream, mirroring broader societal changes.

Finally, an investigation into the author's perspective and background would provide additional context to understand their depiction of self-identity and the American Dream in the narrative. Through these proposed studies, we aim to further enrich our comprehension of the intricate relationships between literature, self-identity, and societal realities. This ongoing exploration underlines the vibrant interplay between individual narratives and collective cultural frameworks, highlighting the profound ways literature reflects and shapes our understanding of ourselves and our dreams.

In a word, the true meaning of literary works should be combined with a larger social reality, and truly traced back to the political and historical context of the time, because any object is inevitably related to a certain framework or historical situation. James Joyce and Franz Kafka adhere to a new tragic view, where material and spiritual aspects of the characters are constantly separated, showing that fate is a difficult journey, and personal faith and aspirations are used to resolve the tension between the individual and the social reality. The purpose of the novel is not only to outline the crisis of identity, but also to have a breadth that spans history and a depth that digs into reality, involving people in the vortex of existing contradictions in society.

In *Them*, Oates elaborates on various modes of individual rebellion when societal mechanisms conflict with the individual. Various characters in the book attribute this process of rebellion to an elusive fate. Some fail, becoming irritable and angry due to these failures, such as Howard Wendell; others maintain hope despite being "tricked" by fate, like Jules Wendell; still others recognize the cruelty of fate and choose an even harsher method to confront it, like Maureen Wendell who sees constructing a new moral and ethical perspective as a viable solution. Firstly, one must be filled with hope for life. Jules Wendell, Oates' favorite character in *Them*, maintains an optimistic attitude toward life regardless of what cruel jest fate plays. Secondly, a sense of social responsibility is essential. Oates' perception of fate begins to intertwine with morality in her book *Them*. She believes that fate is not entirely unpredictable, but closely connected with an individual's actions and character. The collective values of society can have a profound impact on individual destinies. Thus, the true determiner of one's fate is still self-identity. The goodness and hope inherent in humanity remain the worthiest spiritual aspects to extol.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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