

Joyce Carol Oates's *Solstice* (1985)

—Women on the Edge of Time

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Literature has suffered long enough, it seems, from the cultural bias of woman being defined exclusively in terms of her relation to man—father, brother, lover, husband, and son. Emily Dickinson is perhaps the first artist to detect the subtle evil inherent in this convention; in 1863 she sang:

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—¹

Naturally, the protest (for the poem could be read as a wry comment on woman's fate as she knew it) went unnoticed in her time and in many more years to come due to Dickinsonian strategy of indirection: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—". The poet sugar-coated "the Truth's superb surprise" for their "infirm Delight" (Poem 1129).

A half century later in 1929,² addressing a group of students at Girton College, Virginia Woolf surmised that it would take another hundred years for a Mary Carmichael to mature—namely to write another *Life's Adventure*³ worth serious consideration. In retrospect, Woolf's speculation has proved too conservative; in less than fifty years since her prediction our book shelves now overflow with novels by women about women. Books on companionship among women are as multitudinous as Woolf herself could possibly have imagined. Over the past three decades significant works on the subject have appeared: Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963), Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* (1973), followed by Mary Gordon's *The Company of Women* (1981), and Alice Walker's prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982). All this literature of their own registers a new consciousness on the part of these authors, who indeed "light a torch into that vast chamber where nobody has yet been."⁴

Art, life, and criticism thus compose an interesting triptych, whose panels of the mirror reflect (or refract) the images caught in each partition of the triptych. Woolf's grievance concerning the lack of women friends portrayed in literature, in contrast to a rich literary reservoir where friendship among men is equally extolled as the glory and honor of great heroes, derived from her intimate knowledge of personal life. Woolf knew in life pairs of women companions—two women artists cohabitating in a London studio, for one; she herself went through complex cycles of relationship with Katherine Mansfield, Violet Dickinson, and Vita Sackville-West, mere partial rendition of which takes form in Clarissa's enthusiasm for Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Victorian censorship prohibited, however, free exploration and transcription of that reality of life into literature which is believed to be a mirror held to

nature. Only in recent years enlightened intelligence has sounded the depths of the *terra incognita* and dared to look into that shadowy chamber Woolf referred to more than a half century ago. Just as *A Room of One's Own* impregnated and nurtured a cultural milieu which stimulated women artists to contemplate on the theme of woman's relationship among women, so have works of art such as Morrison's *Sula*⁵ or Lillian Hellman's *Julia* (both fiction and film) occasioned the so-called feminist criticism—scholarly works by perceptive critics: Louise Bernikow's *Among Women* (1980) or Wendy Martin's *An American Triptych* (1984). It can safely be said, therefore, that Bernikow's theorization of female friendship in turn has yielded Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and now Joyce Carol Oates's *Solstice*.

I

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

This short essay is meant to be no more than an extended book-review of Joyce Carol Oates's latest novel which appeared early this year. With an author like Oates who writes at the pace of a full-length novel (of no less than five hundred pages) a year, plus a collection of stories or a book of poems, essays and articles, the turn-out includes both nuggets of gold and dross. Surely, *Solstice* is, as Catherine Petroski claims, one of her best,⁶ a nugget of gold which marks a divergence in style and subject among the long list of Oates's writings so far. As analysis of female consciousness, the novel is a great step forward from *Do With Me What You Will* (1973), the book dedicated for Patricia Hill Burnett; *Solstice* explores the mystery of psychological entanglements between two adult women, and puts a plummet into the dark recess of emotional life. In this Oates continues in her familiar terrain since her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964) and *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1966) through her gothic romances. Her new book is different, however, from previous achievements of the author in that here Oates delineates a woman's struggle in search of her esthetic and professional as well as personal identities not in relation to men but in relation to another woman; and thereby she illustrates that an enterprise of women's lives alone can make good reading, and that deepest experience is available for women without their involvements with men.

As Oates's characters in *Solstice* perceive it, friendship entails (as love does) pain, jealousy and antagonism, fear of abandonment as well as rapture, support and comfort; the intensity of ecstasy or anguish they endure in their relationship is as fierce and consuming as that in love. And through that labyrinth of psychological entanglements the two women emerge with full knowledge of themselves and of each other. Oates confronts the problem of female friendship, which engages contemporary writers of both sexes, squarely in her new book, and brings to light much that has been in the dark, and provides a new perspective on companionship among women in literature. The world depicted in *Solstice* is by no means one of sisterly love or of feminine bucolic joys of sharing recipes and gossip about husbands and lovers, past and present, which constitute a rich texture of John Updike's novel on the similar

subject, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). Nor does *Solstice* offer such cozy “belief that a conspiracy of women upholds the world.”⁷

Instead, Oates examines the nature of “a friendship that had taken root and grown in secret, without their conscious knowledge or guidance,”⁸ in terms of the universal, with the question of time, age and mortality. Two women, Monica Jensen and Sheila Trask, stand on the edge of time; as shown in Figure I, their trajectories intersect at a crucial moment in their lives, when each woman makes heroic efforts in her own way to get out of the maze, “the labyrinth as a state of mind” (P.53): “‘Ariadne’s Thread has snapped, and now the poor creature is wandering in the labyrinth,’ Sheila said” (p.106). Both the title of Oates’s novel, “*Solstice*,” and the title of Sheila’s painting, “Ariadne’s Thread,”⁹ on which Sheila is working when a friendship takes root, crystalize the action of the book.

As has been suggested, *Solstice* differs from Oates’s other works in style as well as in subject. It is not written in the densely-packed, solid prose which characterizes her fiction; its length is only one third of her usual book, divided into four small chapters: “The Scar,” “The Mirror-Ghoul,” “Holiday,” and “The Labyrinth”; sections in each chapter are as sparsely spaced as they could possibly be—there is one section composed of only twenty-seven words (p.52). *Solstice* thus moves to a different tune, and it reverberates with a lyrical voice, say of Emily Dickinson, cryptic and firmly controlled, a style which quite suits the subject, as will be shown in the following discussion of the novel.

The title “*Solstice*,” is given a meaning by the author taken from *Webster’s New World Dictionary*: “... 3. a furthest point, turning point, or point of culmination.” A “point of culmination” (a climax) in the novel and in the relation between the two people occurs around the winter solstice (in the Chapter, “Holiday”), when their trajectories (shown in Figure I) make contact at one point. As day and night themselves shift their balance, there happens a change in the control each woman exercises on the other. The friendship freezes, as Monica convinces herself: “And it *had* ended, simply and irrevocably; it had burned itself out” (p.129), which turns out, however, to be only “a turning point.” After Sheila’s return in late March, the relationship resumes as if “nothing had changed”; and this time Monica “would be cautious—*she* would be in control” (p.166). Thus the catastrophe is postponed until late in May, when Sheila’s show opens, and Monica collapses. The bond between the friends, therefore, corresponds to a natural cycle, seasonal changes from summer to winter, and from the light to the dark.

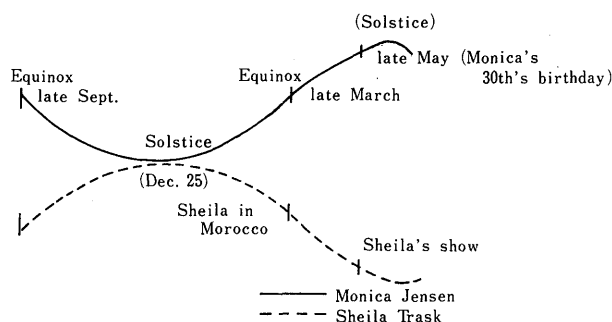


Figure I

The story begins in late September (after summer); naturally, Monica's trajectory starts to descend, reaching its "furthest point" around Christmas, then takes an upward curve, *apparently*, during Sheila's absence. Curiously enough, their trajectories form a mirror-image of each other, being one and the same like their "mirror-ghoul" they dare not acknowledge to themselves. Oates delineates Monica and Sheila as opposites: Monica in her late twenties is a golden girl, a summery girl; Sheila, tall and dark-haired, is in her midthirties, loosely dressed, mannish and smelling of sweat, turpentine, and of stables. This categorization, however, is misleading, because they are not equals fighting for the favor of a hero. Nor do they become lovers in the sense Celie and Shug Avery in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are lovers. Physical contact between the two is non-existent; the dramatic situation in *Solstice* is kept under firm control. Monica dates the patient Keith, a promising lawyer and a member of "Survivalists," while profoundly and inexplicably entangled with her friend and her paintings. Sheila enjoys the company of male friends, her own and her late husband's; her lovers includes young artists and homosexuals. Besides, they go pub-crawling, disguised as "Sherill Ann" and "Mary Beth," which ends in a fiasco one dark night, when they almost get raped by a couple of local truck drivers. Men are marginal in their lives; what engages them is their work—teaching career and painting—and their own life. As James makes his characters in pursuit of personal freedom and autonomy free of familial obligations, Oates creates in her new novel women characters unencumbered—they are child-free as well as man-free—so that the nature of female companionship is fully scrutinized and given bold relief.

Monica Jensen with a dubious past—a failed marriage, the ill-timed pregnancy, and the abortion—finds a teaching job at a boys' boarding-school in Bucks County in Pennsylvania; she absorbs herself in routine work, teaching and restoring the farm house she rents as if obsessed, as most people do who want to forget their pasts. Monica anesthetizes herself, like a speaker in Dickinson's poem which Oates quotes for an epigraph:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
 The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
 The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
 And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

 This is the Hour of Lead—
 Remembered, if outlived,
 As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
 First—Chill—then Stupor—then letting go— (Poem 341)

Monica's life assumes "A Quartz contentment"; her life at this time is indeed "the Hour of Lead": "Monica told herself *sternly* that if her experience had been special it would be wicked of her to forget it: but it hadn't been special, it belonged to too many people of her generation" (p.10. My italics.) Here this golden girl of all time commits a serious mistake, for which she is to be punished as she later realizes (p.224). For one's past invariably catches one; one has to make "final payments,"¹⁰ yet. To settle accounts with one's past experience, one must make reconciliation with it; Monica is to go through another round of "great pain"

which won't leave her this time demure and content like a stone, demanding her complete "letting go" of herself.

This Monica Jensen meets Sheila Trask, a local celebrity and a painter in her own right, at the reception held in her (Monica's) honor at the headmaster's, on which occasion no recognition is made between the two, except that Monica finds on her way out "a limp torn white flower" left on the flagstone walk. A limp torn white camellia shows Sheila's state of mind at "an impasse," and Monica becomes a caretaker of this self-wrapped artist who strikes Monica as "an odd bird of prey" (p.6). The dark-haired woman with "black rapacious eyes" (p.160) is in her own way generous and attentive to the unsure and lonely woman eager to establish herself in a new environment. Which flatters and satisfies Monica: "'The only *eccentric* thing about her,' Monica said *stiffly*, the next time she was asked about Sheila Trask, '—is her generosity. I've never known anyone like her'" (p.52. *My italics.*) Monica is ready to defend and protect her friend from the scandal-hungry community.

So it begins, "a friendship that had taken root and grown in secret, without their conscious knowledge or guidance." In the first phase of their friendship Sheila, who initiates it, naturally exerts an influence on the weaker Monica. But in fact, Sheila is restless and suffers from artistic paralysis, which symptoms do not escape the observant eyes of the younger woman. The darkly suicidal Sheila preys on the kind, eager and vulnerable Monica, who repeats the victim's role she played in her eight year marriage with Harold Bell. Yet at the same time, Monica's support of Sheila provides the sole purpose for her existence. She becomes the nurturer of her friend, just as Celie tends the sick Shug Avery, a Betty Smith and mistress of Mr. _____, Celie's "husband." The good and innocent Celie sees no anomaly in the arrangement, because she does not know why her heart hurts.¹¹ But Shug's love brings Celie an awakening; Celie comes to know herself separate from those around her—men and children. "She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick. *First time somebody made something and name it after me.*"¹² Her woman friend gives Celie a name; Shug is virtually the beggetter of this good woman. To be sure, Alice Walker's women friends are bound, like Nel and Sula in Morrison's *Sula*, by their strong sense of sisterhood as victims of men (and whites). Just the same, *The Color Purple* is an unforgettable rendition of female friendship, a story of an innocent woman who comes to self-knowledge—"I am so happy, I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time"¹³—through her encounter with another woman. In *Solstice* the friendship between Sheila and Monica undergoes much more complex cycles; because they are both man-free and child-free, their commitments to each other devastate and consume as well as support and release both the cared-for and the caretaker.

II

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

It has been suggested that Sheila's control of her younger friend is deceptive. The power she wields over Monica loses its potency, as the winter solstice approaches, and the impending deadline of her show scheduled in February quite enervates her. Throughout the novel there is a constant reminder of the passage of time: "time leapt, pleated" (p.10, 230) or "The clock ran in one direction only" (p.79) is repeated like a refrain. Such presentiment of the dark and mortality is then amplified by Dickinson's poem, which Sheila starts reciting one afternoon in her studio, and which Monica finishes: "There's a certain Slant of light,/Winter Afternoons—/That oppresses, like the Heft/Of Cathedral Tunes—" (Poem 258), or echoed in another on the same motif:

Presentiment is that long Shadow—on the Lawn
Indicative that Suns go down—

The Notice to the startled Grass
That Darkness is about to pass—(Poem 764)

The imminent sense of time oppresses Sheila, and "the phenomenon of aging" (p.78), "a certain Slant of light," paralyzes her as she works on her painting; "My brushes are lousy," she confides in Monica. Which accelerates Sheila's internal struggle to find her own mode of expression to transmute an idea of mortality into art: "Always and forever *mortality*. Nothing else engages me, nothing else terrifies me, but I can't seem to translate it into work, my mind is racing, spinning, it's going around in circles and I can't get off, every syllable I utter is the sheerest self-pity and I'm not imagining it—my brushes are lousy" (p.113). Her self-pity turns into a suicidal threat, which works as psychological blackmail upon the concerned and caring friend.

To repeat, *Solstice* is a story of two particular women friends set in a universal context. In this respect, Oates's use of Dickinson's poetry is effective; echoes from Dickinson reverberate in the novel, elucidating and enhancing the meaning of deprivation, anxiety and suffering which Oates's poignant prose evokes. Reciprocation exists between the reading of *Solstice* and Dickinson's poetry, as the one enriches the other. "After great pain" dramatizes the clinical case of Monica Jensen when we encounter her at the outset of the story. And "There's a certain Slant of light" ramifies the fear of mortality which grips the painter. Allusions to Dickinson, therefore, become an integral part of the novel; Oates's lyrical style in *Solstice* reminiscent of the nineteenth century poet's disjointed and cryptic manner of expression is appropriate to the tone of the book, and it reveals without much articulation on the part of the novelist those feelings Oates's characters endure: the one in silence and the other in hysteria.

Furthermore, if Joanne Feil Diehl's contention that "the discontinuities in Dickinson's poetry express her determination to break free of the male literary tradition"¹⁴ is valid, then Oates's employment of that style in *Solstice* is double-edged in that Sheila gropes in a maze in quest of her own esthetic style, not that of a realistic water color she has earlier tried (and which captivates her friend) nor her late husband's. The novelist's interest in the nineteenth century poet¹⁵ is pertinent in still another respect; Dickinson is known to have enjoyed the companionship of women friends who supported the poet so that she could wholly dedicate herself to her art,¹⁶ a similar tie is developed between Sheila and Monica in Oates's novel.

Sheila needs Monica not to praise, but simply to look, in silence. ("It makes a tremendous difference to me," Sheila admitted, "—to think that you'll be dropping by. Just, you know, to look. *To register that I exist and the paintings exist.*" [p.182. My italics.]) Monica's presence itself gives Sheila her esthetic and personal identity. Hence references to Dickinson are twofold—as artist and woman.

Earlier it has been argued that Oates plays with the meaning of her title, and for good reason. The winter solstice is "a furthest point," and it is also "a turning point", as Sir James G. Frazer's comment illustrates: "In the Julian calender the twenty-fifth of December was reckoned the winter solstice, and it was regarded as the Nativity of the Sun, because the day begins to lengthen and the power of the sun to increase from that turning-point of the year."¹⁷ (See Figure I). When the power of the sun registers the lowest, Sheila leaves for Morocco in search of the sun and the light, and Monica joins her family in Wrightsville, Indiana, during the "Holiday." In Wrightsville, Monica puts her life in order, retracing her past, that is exclusive of her recent experience. After the "Holiday," Monica disciplines herself with teaching, a swimming regimen, study-meetings, and community life. Her year at the Academy seems to be going well with considerable success in prospect at the end of the year, which never comes: "Careers die just like people" (p.176).

Sheila comes back from North Africa late in March (the spring equinox) with extravagant presents for Monica: a pair of silver earrings, a pale green scarf stiched with gold thread, a necklace of chunky amethysts, topas stones and ornamental shells of various sizes (p.165). Just as the limp torn white camellia works a spell on Monica in the beginning of the story, these exotic gifts infect Monica; her premonition that it is "unwise to wear [the poisonous shells] too close to her face" (p.165) becomes a grim reality. For Sheila, the journey undertaken has been "a miscalculation"; the sun and the light deplete rather than replenish her creative energy: "And my head was prized off. Too much light—external light. External fucking light when that has nothing to do with anything *here*" (p.206). The failure of the trip precipitates her crisis, and leads her into a terrifying psychic impasse.

Sheila and Monica are brilliant renditions of people in the "labyrinth" of emotional entanglements. Sheila expects more than ever exorbitant sacrifices from her friend. Monica neglects her duties at school, excuses herself from meetings on the ground that she is wanted elsewhere—at Edgemont where she spends more and more of her time and her life. Her anguish is acute as she endeavors to keep her emotional equilibrium, which is *only simulated*: for it is "impossible to feign/The Beads upon the Forehead/By homely Anguish strung" (Poem 241). Monica rationalizes her behavior: "Now I know precisely what I am doing; what the perimeters of friendship must be" (p.182). But she cannot forever live in "a Quartz contentment." Without scruples Oates dissects the nature of female friendship as prescribed in *Among Women* by Louise Bernikow: "In friendship women do for each other what culture expects them to do for men,"¹⁸ a hypothesis already proven by Toni Morrison or by Alice Walker. Nel and Sula "use each other to grow on."¹⁹ And Walker speaks through one of her characters: "...since the women are friends and will do anything for one another...Their lives always center around work and their children and other women."²⁰ These pictures of self-sufficiency among women illustrate "the great depths and the great raptures of [female]

friendship.”²¹

In *Solstice* Oates concerns herself with “the great depths,” the dark side, of that relationship. Sheila’s exploitation of her friend assumes a demonic ferocity: she won’t release the victim, calling Monica, at the slightest sign of resistance, “La Belle Dame Sans...” (p.173). Drained of energy, psychic and physical, Monica feels very sick, light-headed, ravaged, like Keats’s knight-at-arms with “a lily on [his] brow,/With anguish moist and fever dew.” Oates’s rendition of the captive is, however, less romantic. Her golden hair now coarse and greasy, Monica vomits, soils the sheets, only “grateful to have a place, a private place, in which to puke out her guts:” (p.232). The disease must run its course: “Now she was sick, seriously sick, but there was nothing to be done except wait it out” (p.230). Monica’s sense of falling, descending into the depths of her own body reminds one again of Dickinson:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—
.....
And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then— (Poem 280)

The poem above-quoted is about a mental collapse; it is a vivid portrayal of Monica’s mental and physical state on her thirtieth birthday, after Sheila’s show opens in success. Monica’s whole being is depleted by the strong, dark-haired “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the mirror-ghoul, who sucks up the friend’s energy, promising to reciprocate: “I’ll make it up to you, all you’ve endured for my sake” (p.212). Monica thus pays for Sheila’s “generosity” (not at all tender care) with her career, her health and her sanity, as it were.

The novel closes as Monica finishes “knowing,” and being carried to hospital: “[Sheila] is swearing under her breath, seated close beside Monica,...‘You shouldn’t have done this—you shouldn’t have doubted me—we’ll be friends for a long, long time,’ she says, ‘—unless one of us dies’” (p.243). The *dénouement* is not to be understood as the end of all, but as a complete surrender, “letting go” of oneself, of one’s “stiff Heart” and “a Quartz contentment” (Poem 341), which precedes cure and liberation. There is sufficient evidence in the novel that the two women survive their emotional crisis. Earlier Sheila imagines herself as a poor creature wandering in a maze, and convinces herself and Monica: “But she’ll emerge. One day soon. She always has in the past” (p.106). And they each will emerge again this time, because they become a lifeline for each other.

Monica learns the hard way the meaning of the commitment she makes, which is *not* “only a friendship,” as she nonchalantly tells herself. She realizes that one’s involvement with another is necessarily demanding and fulfilling as well as unsettling, that her naive confidence in her charmed state of “the golden girl” is a delusion, and that her experience is uniquely her own, not one of too many cases of her generation. Thus, Monica’s “Hour of Lead

[is] remembered, if outlived" (Poem 341). With this self-knowledge Monica will take good care of herself and her friend. "Friendship isn't a matter of barter, is it?" murmurs Sheila to Monica (p.51). The answer the novel offers is *not* the expected "No" but a "Yes." *Solstice* is, like *Sula* and *The Color Purple* before it, an indelible dramatization of friendship among women, full of pain and suffering which consumes *and* nurtures both the cared-for and the caretaker.

Doris Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* (1973) is a rendition of Kate Brown, woman in her fifties at an impasse during "the summer before the dark," who becomes reconciled to the fact of mutability by means of a hippy-girl of sorts for whom Kate plays a surrogate mother. *Solstice* treats "a phenomenon of aging" and mortality and seeks an answer to the problem in the characters' realization of their selfhood in relation to each other, to admit their "mirror-ghoul," and in their knowledge that friendship means supportiveness as well as sacrifice of each other. The balance is never in equilibrium, the pendulum swings back and forth between two "solstices."

Solstice is one sustained drama of tension, pain and suffering both Monica and Sheila endure in their struggle with time—without much external violence (except the pseudo-rape of Monica by Win, "a country gentleman.") The novel begins, as has been observed, with Monica "after great pain"; the scar goes deeper, because "invisible," which gives her "an imperial affliction/Sent us of the Air." In the foregoing discussion frequent references, specific and general, are made to Dickinson's poems, the poems about mortality, pain and suffering, and nervous breakdown. It can now be contended that Joyce Carol Oates's new novel is a detailed explication of Dickinson's poems—Poems 258 and 341—and many others, as these ramify to poems on similar themes—Poem 241, 280, or 1129. Thus the novel becomes highly-charged with lyricism which meets the requirements of the author for her book about two women who suffer complex cycles of their own psychic crisis and of each other's.

If Oates's *Solstice* is read as a captivating interpretative work on Dickinson's poetry, it also aims at a re-interpretation of a Greek myth, the myth of "Ariadne's Thread," the title of Sheila's painting: "This is only about 'Ariadne's Thread.' This has nothing to do with *Theseus*," Sheila explains angrily to Monica. (p.53. My italics.) Sheila's voice here overlaps that of the author. Oates's new novel, like the painting, has no hero, no Theseus; instead it offers a picture of two women on the edge of time, wandering in a maze, and each becomes a lifeline, "Ariadne's Thread," for the other. Hence, the completion of Sheila's painting and the success of her show, which registers "a point of culmination," become the author's own. And we are, like Monica and Sheila, on the edge of time, and also in another sense stand as witness to evolutions happening in our consciousness; our life and art are compelled to make re-assessment of that which has long been taken for granted.

One final word to conclude this exploration of Oates's novel and of Dickinson's poetry as a guideline for a reading of *Solstice*. The two artists both deal with the universal—the problem of death, pain and suffering. However, unlike Emily Dickinson, whose business is immortality, and who has given a vision of equilibrium, "a Zone whose even Years/No Solstice interrupt—" Oates's characters are deprived of such a vision; nothing engages Sheila, but mor-

tality, an idea which she struggles to translate into art. Her predicament and Monica's are uniquely and distinctly ours, therefore, are recognized as immediate and plausible. A perfected vision such as Dickinson's eventually belongs to poetry and its revelation:

There is a Zone whose even Years
 No Solstice interrupt—
 Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon
 Whose perfect Seasons wait—

 Whose Summer set in Summer, till
 The Centuries of June
 And Centuries of August cease
 And Consciousness—is Noon (Poem 1056).

Notes

1. Emily Dickinson, Poem 754, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), Vols. 3. ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Hereafter references to Dickinson's poems in this paper are identified by Johnson's numbering in the same edition, and given in parentheses within the text.
2. The year coincides with the year of publication of Dickinson's Poem 754. Woolf's address itself was made in October 1928.
3. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), p.126.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For discussion of Morrison's *Sula* as a dramatization of female friendship set in ballad, see Keiko Beppu, "Toni Morrison," *Post World War II Evolution of American Writers: Fiction* (Kyoto: Yamaguchishoten, 1983), ed. Toshihiko Ogata, pp.212-223.
6. Catherine Petroski, "Review," *The Saturday Review* (March/April 1985), p.61. Also favorable is Rebecca Pepper Sinkler's "Time and Her Sisters," *The New York Review of Books* (January 20, 1985), p.4.
7. John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p.19.
8. Joyce Carol Oates, *Solstice* (New York: Dutton, 1985), p.27. References to *Solstice* are to this edition, and paginations are given in parentheses within the text following the quotations.
9. After killing the monster in the maze, Theseus emerges from the labyrinth with the help of a magic ball of thread given by Ariadne, Minos's daughter, whom Theseus betrays and leaves behind. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Penguin, 1955), Vol. I, p.339. In *Solstice* there is no hero, no Theseus.
10. The phrase "final payments" is the title of Mary Gordon's first novel, *Final Payments: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1978). It is about a woman, who in her thirties is deprived of her purpose in life by the death of her father who dominated her life, or who *was* her life.
11. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), p.75.
12. *Ibid.*, My italics.
13. *Ibid.*, p.193.
14. Wendy Martin, *An American Triptych* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp.81-82.
15. Oates's interest in and use of Emily Dickinson's poetry is not limited to *Solstice*. She quotes Dickinson's very first poem written in conventional heroic couplet for her epigraph in *A Blood-*

moor Romance (New York: Dutton, 1982). To be sure, Dickinson looms much larger in the present novel in discussion.

16. Martin, p.82.
17. Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: McMillan, 1922), p.416.
18. Louise Bernikow, *Among Women* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980), p.144.
19. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (Bantam Edition, 1975), p.44.
20. *The Color Purple*, p.153.
21. Bernikow, p.119. What I mean by the self-sufficiency in female friendship is the "eye to eye" relationship Bernikow points out as characteristic of female friendship as opposed to the "shoulder to shoulder" *camaraderie* among men.

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