

Breaking the Chains of Trauma to Achieve Liberation in Oates' Novel, We Were the Mulvaney

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Abstract:

Joyce Carol Oates' novel *We Were the Mulvaney* (1996) revolves around the theme of trauma. Marianne, the central character, grapples with the aftermath of a traumatic incident that unfolds at a prom where she is sexually assaulted. This trauma stems from a betrayal by her school friends, particularly Zachary. The repercussions of this harrowing event are far-reaching, leading Marianne to endure thirteen years of estrangement from her parents and face societal scrutiny. The family experiences a profound sense of shame and guilt, resulting in the deterioration of their social standing and taking a toll on Michael, the family patriarch's health. Initially portrayed in idyllic circumstances, the Mulvaney family's life descends into chaos, particularly affecting their beloved daughter, Marianne. However, through a series of trials, they gradually overcome their feelings of guilt and shame, emerging stronger financially. Marianne remains the focal point of ongoing struggles, marked by her eventual return home after thirteen years, prompted by her father's illness and subsequent passing. Her journey is haunted by trauma, yet she exhibits resilience and gradually begins to heal through her unwavering determination.

Key Words: Belatedness, liberation, occurrence, oscillation, PTSD, trauma.

Introduction:

Joyce Carol Oates (1938-) is celebrated as a prominent American author renowned for crafting narratives featuring female protagonists navigating various challenges and triumphing over adversity. Her extensive body of work delves deeply into themes such as child abuse, sexual assault, exile, free will, evolution, gender, class, spirituality, forgiveness, and the essence and significance of guilt. Frequently, the settings of her stories evoke a strong sense of nostalgia for her childhood time and place, with her working-class upbringing affectionately depicted throughout much of her fiction. Oates is recognized for her resilience and diligent work ethic.

In 1975, *in an interview with the New York Times*, Oates affirmed her dedication to a conventional lifestyle characterized by moderation, adhering strictly to regular routines without any extravagance or necessity to structure her time. When labeled as a "workaholic" by a reporter, she refuted the notion, stating, "I am not aware of exerting excessive effort, or even of 'working' at all. Writing and teaching have always been deeply fulfilling for me, to the extent that I don't perceive them as work in the traditional sense."(Interview)

In *We Were the Mulvaney's* (1996), Joyce Carol Oates the workaholic and modern writer vividly depicts the unraveling of the American family and a corresponding way of life with penetrating insight and deep empathy. She consistently explores traumatic experiences and their profound impacts, offering solutions through her characters' journeys in her works. This article delves into the causes of trauma, its enduring effects spanning over thirteen years in the protagonist's life, and her eventual liberty by reunion after a prolonged period of estrangement. Thematically, the novel revolves around the ideal of the harmonious American family living in prosperity and peace in the

rural northeastern United States during the early 1970s. The Mulvaney family, the archetype of this ideal, grapples with the fragility of happiness in the face of life's unpredictable twists and turns.

Trauma has become a significant public health issue in this era, not just due to its widely recognized impact on military personnel and those affected by accidents or criminal acts, but also because of its covert consequences on individuals experiencing sexual and domestic violence, as well as on communities and educational institutions grappling with the aftermath of abuse, neglect, and substance misuse. Once the individual is haunted by trauma, the traumatic events can be stored 'separately' in the mind from normal experience, and in some cases, this will result in actual amnesia.

Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is understood through its very 'absence,' the absence of something the victim does not fully assimilate. It becomes difficult for the survivors to articulate their experiences directly. Caruth, therefore, supports the means of literature through which the unsaid and unheard can be understood as a mechanism of writing. Oates reveals the sufferings of the protagonist through the portrayal of an event that occurred and the struggles undergone to come out of it.

The Mulvaney family resides on High Point farm near Mt. Ephraim in upstate New York, epitomizing the ideal of familial harmony. Michael, an owner of a prosperous roofing business, and Corinne, a dedicated homemaker and self-proclaimed antique dealer, have nurtured four children: Michael Jr., Patrick, Marianne, and Judd. Their lives revolve around the farm and its myriad animals, although Michael harbors aspirations of social advancement. Initially depicted as a contented unit enveloped in a serene ambiance, the family's tranquillity is shattered by a singular traumatic event, plunging them into tragedy.

“Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature the way it was precisely not knowing the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (Caruth 1996:4) It means that trauma isn't solely rooted in the straightforward violent or initial event from an individual's history as it happens in the life of Marianne but rather in how its unresolved essence—the very aspect that wasn't comprehended initially comes back to torment the survivor in the future. Following the St. Valentine’s Prom in 1976, a crucial shift occurred to Marianne, she, as the sole non-senior member of the queen's court, joins a gathering at a classmate's residence and there she encounters a senior acquaintance, Zachary Lundt. In trust induced by his charming words and the offer of alcohol, Marianne finds herself vulnerable. Eventually, Zachary proposes to escort Marianne home, only to subject her to the ordeal of rape.

“Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then,” but “It's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people.” (van der Kolk, 2014). The protagonist is speechless by fear and isolation as soon as the incident occurs. She has failed to make her own decisions. Out of fear and guilt, Marianne hides the torn and bloodstained satin dress in the back of the closet and throws everything else from her bag into the wastepaper basket. As a traumatized person is not able to think coherently about what happened or express or connect her feelings about the experience, Marianne experiences profound distress, and she is unable to think of the event and its consequences. The impact of this event on the family is chaotic, and the aftermath affects the lives of all members of Marianne’s family. It is a snapshot of the dark side of the family. This is the situation in which the trauma haunts not only Marianne but the entire family. However, the effects on the victim remain for almost a decade. Mt. Ephraim's society refuses to acknowledge what has

happened to Marianne, both Michael and Corinne struggle to understand the abrupt change, and thus, Michael's hatred of Marianne's admonishing presence within the family grows.

Bessel van der Kolk exemplifies that the terror and isolation at the core of trauma reshape both brain and body. When Corinne chooses to send Marianne away to live with a distant cousin, sacrificing her daughter for her husband's and the family's sake, Marianne feels powerless and deeply shocked. As a result, the protagonist is now haunted by trauma and engulfed in feelings of anguish, terror, and a sense of being overwhelmed by life. When Marianne's brother Patrick meets her, he tells her, "You have no choice: You have your own life". (MUV 234) These words cause her heart to toughen, leaving her feeling deeply saddened and pitifully helpless.

Karen Saakvitne defines "Trauma as an event or series of events that are so overwhelming and threatening to life or sanity that a person cannot cope". Certainly, a specific and terrible event triggers a chain of occurrences for her, including an extended period of exile, an uncomfortable stay at her relative's home, disinterested academic pursuits, employment, and an unexpected return to her home. Consequently, this prolonged isolation and her adverse experiences profoundly impact her mental and physical well-being. Marianne is innocent and utterly rejected by her family and society. This leads her to absolute amnesia when she is forced to live in her aunt's house and outside other than own her house. As the days pass, she is no longer happy living with her relative. Her real freedom is blocked and her mind is obsessed with fear and worry, and the expected call from her father to bring her back home ends in vain. "What returns to haunt the victim, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known." (Caruth 1996:6) It suggests, that the violence and the punishment continue to torment the victim and not the actual occurrence of the violent event but also the realization that its brutality

has yet to be fully comprehended by the protagonist. It takes place not in a short duration but in a long exile.

Herman, Trauma, and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror, New York: Basic Books (1992:33) “Psychological trauma is an affiliation of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force.” When the power behind an event is natural, it is labeled a disaster. However, when the source of the event is other humans, it is referred to as atrocities. These traumatic occurrences disrupt the usual support systems that provide individuals with a sense of control, connection, and significance. Therefore, when trauma arises from human actions, it impacts the entire family.

Trauma has been perceived and defined in different ways over the years, contingent on the development of knowledge and the understanding of the impact of traumatic experiences on the individual, family, community, and society (van der Kolk, 2014). Marianne experiences a multitude of distressing events stemming from a single catastrophic incident. The root cause of her turmoil arises when she attends a party with her trusted friends, only to face betrayal from them. Despite being Mulvaney's beloved and virtuous daughter, Marianne inadvertently disappoints her parents due to an unforeseen tragic flaw. Corrine regrets when her daughter is abused and says, “I am her mother, it must have been partly my fault.” (MUV 115) It is a tough time and the hurt girl Marianne is in panic when her mother thinks that she is not well and takes her to the family doctor Oakley. The victim is in chaos about telling the truth or hiding it from the doctor and parents. she refused to see the doctor and did not reveal the issue. Once the doctor gives the report, the truth comes to light.

Consequently, Corrine makes a difficult and unpleasant decision to send her daughter away, prompted by Michael's confession that he can no longer bear to be around her. Marianne, once

cherished as the family's darling, now finds herself the target of her father's resentment. The punishment is brought out to safeguard the family's social standing and prestige. However, the harsh penalty of exile drastically alters her life. The moment she is banished evokes a mix of anxiety and fear within her. Throughout the ensuing painful days, she grapples with hardships imposed by family, community, and society. As a result, the once tightly-knit Mulvaney family begins to unravel, their collective shame magnified by Marianne's catastrophe. The character trait of forgiveness is exemplified in Marianne's nature. Despite enduring the punishment of exile, she can embody the essence of her suffering. While Patrick struggles to forgive, Marianne is the opposite. Her brother expresses, "I cannot bring myself to forgive them for Marianne. Marianne, on the other hand, forgives them."(MUV 289)

With poignant precision, Oates skilfully navigates the aftermath of the rape of the protagonist and its impact all around her, illustrating how swiftly and irreversibly goodness can succumb to evil. Consequently, the trauma and its repercussions manifest differently for each in the entire family grapples with challenges and a subsequent decline following the incident. Particularly, Michael descends into heavy drinking, resulting in the loss of his business and the family farm. His life undergoes a drastic transformation, eventually leaving the steadfastly loyal Corinne in dire poverty as he relocates to Rochester, feeling as though his family, both children and wife, have slipped away from him. Struggling to maintain steady employment, he deteriorates physically and harbors feelings of betrayal from his children. Judd, the youngest member of the family, comforts his father by reassuring him, "Don't worry, Dad. I will go to work, too. I can help out." (367) Conversely, Mulvaney's health deteriorates, and he struggles to regain it. Ultimately, he passed away in 1986, broken and solitary. Corinne is haunted by trauma as she worries about Michael and wrestles with the family's financial hardships. Patrick, refusing to accept the family's response to Marianne's

rape, seeks vengeance by kidnapping and publicly shaming Zachary Lundt. He says, “I would let you die and let you live.” (MUV 304) This act leads him to abandon college and wander the country for years. Despite facing formidable challenges, all in a house confront them with determination and self-assurance. Consequently, the fate of one member influences the wandering paths of the others within the family.

A definition offered by Karen Saakvitne is Psychological trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or of enduring conditions in which the individual’s ability to integrate his or her emotional experience is overwhelmed (i.e. his or her ability to stay present, understand what is happening, integrate the feelings, and make sense of the experience), or the individual experiences (subjectively) a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995: 60). Accordingly, the lives of individuals undergo specific changes. Corinne gradually reconstructs her life and, alongside her friend Sable Mills, by purchasing a small farm. They establish an antique barn, while the others settle down through marriage and start families. The lasting impact is on Marianne and she experiences this psychological trauma throughout her life. In an Interview with David Bullard internationally acclaimed clinician, educator, and researcher Bessel van der Kolk, shares some observations for understanding and treating people who have experienced trauma. He says that trauma extends beyond a mere narrative from the past that explains feelings of fear, anger, or loss of control. Instead, it is relived in the present through deeply distressing physical sensations and emotions, often not consciously linked to memories of past trauma. Physical reactions such as increased heart rate, nausea, and characteristic body responses like collapse, rigidity, or rage reflect the experiences of terror, rage, and helplessness. Overcoming trauma involves the challenge of tolerating these emotions and sensations without being overwhelmed, which can be achieved

through various methods, all centered around establishing a sense of safety and regulating physiological arousal. (Interview)

“Trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (Caruth 1996:2) It is inevitable for the protagonist to face trauma, experience delayed punishment, and overcome to attain liberty with her willpower. Formerly admired and respected, Marianne finds herself ostracized, deserted by her friends, and alienated by her parents. It triggers her anguish and makes her to be submerged in a world full of panic. Once the epitome of perfection as a daughter, Marianne embodied everything her mother could never achieve: she was a cheerleader, a skilled seamstress, and an excellent cook. However, her life is now put to the test by a distressing experience. She did not anticipate that the earlier event would lead to belated experiences. She neither predicted her father's punishment nor her mother's agreement with him. Furthermore, she expected her brothers to support her desire to remain at home, but this hope ultimately ends in disappointment, culminating in her earning the family's disdain. Marianne now leads a life marked by restless wandering.

As trauma is a direct link between the psyche and external violence and is the most destructive psychic disorder, thus it makes her experience not only physical violence but psychological suffering and unable to balance her with maturity. Her quirky obsessions and personal tragedies lead her to post-traumatic stress disorder. “Post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control. As such, PTSD seems to provide the most”. (Caruth 1996:58) It elucidates that post-traumatic stress disorder is when the mind is seized, both psychologically and neurobiologically, by an event beyond its control.

Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) elucidates that traumatic incidents are exceptional not because they are infrequent, but because they exceed the usual human coping mechanisms for life. Unlike ordinary adversities, traumatic events typically entail threats to life or physical well-being, or a confrontation with violence and mortality. They thrust individuals into helplessness and fear, eliciting responses akin to a catastrophe. In this context, the traumatic event persists in violence, yet it does not culminate in death.

“Trauma is a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of an event's unbearable nature and the story of its survival.” (Caruth 1996:7) Currently, the incident isn't causing her immediate psychological distress, but the recurring thoughts of pain and fear are impacting her mental well-being, potentially leading to PTSD. Despite pursuing freedom in life, Marianne faces obstacles in many ways. The moment she goes for a Prom there the evil disguises as good. Then the trauma surfaces when she relocates from her aunt's home to complete high school in Kilburn. Initially, she enrolls in the nearby college but quickly realizes the financial strain. Eventually, she's offered participation in a cooperative program where they assist with her college expenses in return for her labor at the cooperative. All of these factors contribute to her experiencing grief due to her fluctuating mental state and inconsistent decision-making. She finds herself caught in an oscillation between her separation from the family and the expectation of reuniting home, deciding whether to pursue her studies or abandon them, and choosing between marrying a man she is interested in or fulfilling the wishes of her professor.

“The suffering recognized through the voice represents the experience of an individual traumatized by his past the repetition of his trauma as it shapes his life “(Caruth 1996:8) It means that the agony conveyed by the voice reflects the ordeal of someone deeply affected by past trauma, a recurring

experience that profoundly influences present existence. Marianne is profoundly impacted by her past experiences, which have imparted valuable lessons and led her to approach her future with a determined outlook. Despite enduring severe consequences from her parents and a society that excludes Mulvaney's family, she is courageous enough to follow her convictions. While in exile, she revisits the past repeatedly with overwhelming anxiety. Although the punishment intensifies her resolve, she rises like a phoenix and forges a new path for her sustenance.

Trauma impacts her ability to focus, recall memories, establish trusting connections, and feel a sense of belonging. Joyce Carol Oates defines “Of our hurts we make monuments of survival. If we survive.” To construct the monument of survival from wounds, Marianne endures all the pains and challenges while she pursues her studies and works in the coop. She makes a sincere effort to make a worthy living. Marianne adores the cooperative because it resembles the family she dearly longs for. She dedicates herself so fervently to her work there that she struggles in her college classes. However, she finds solace in the newfound understanding that aids her survival. “The act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one’s own life. It is because the mind can.” (Caruth1996: 62) Thus, it suggests that the process of surviving, akin to encountering trauma, involves repeatedly facing the necessity and impossibility of comprehending the danger to one's existence. This happens because the mind is capable of such responses. Marianne resides in an environment where trauma relentlessly shadows her, and she grapples extensively to surmount the traumatic circumstances and maintain her regular life. In due course, Marianne assumes more duties at the co-op than she can manage alongside her studies. Subsequently, the co-op leader, Abelove, expresses affection for her, prompting Marianne to move forward. She embarks on a journey akin to Patrick's and eventually finds herself at a sanctuary for old and mistreated animals overseen by

Whit West at Stump Hill Creek. Here, she encounters an unconventional veterinarian and starts employment at his animal shelter, eventually marrying him.

The twist extends to Mulvaney's journey to overcome trauma. First, Corrine moves back to Mr. Ephraim. Eventually, she meets a friendly woman who is very much like her. The two buy a small farm and rebuild the antique store that Corrine once had at High Point Farm. Alternatively, Mike is married and has two children, with another on the way. Marianne has married her veterinarian and has two children of her own. Patrick has settled down to teach autistic children and has found a woman he loves. Judd is a newspaper editor and still searching for true love.

PTSD is a genuine condition and not indicative of weakness, Tuma clarifies. Individuals shouldn't face their struggles alone and in silence. However, Marianne grapples with her challenges mostly in isolation and silence. She lacks the courage to return home and advocate for her freedom as the family heir. Instead, she remains passive and silently contemplates her hardships, consumed by distress. While many people naturally recover from trauma, prolonged or intense symptoms can prolong the healing process. Marianne, the central character, struggles to navigate her life for nearly thirteen years. Her life takes a significant turn once more when Marianne receives the long-awaited call after twelve years and returns home to visit her father. Sadly, her father is dying of cancer and remains largely unaware of her presence during her visit. The father and daughter have achieved reconciliation and forgiveness. His boundless love for Marianne is evident as she is his sole daughter. When Micheal Mulvaney addresses her by name, she senses his forgiveness. Judd reassures her by saying, "Dad always cherished you, and while he may not have expressed it openly, he was never ashamed of you." (MUV 428)

The narrative explores the interconnectedness of one's trauma with that of another individual, illustrating how trauma can potentially facilitate encounters with others. This occurs through the

unexpected opportunity to listen to and understand another person's pain. (Caruth 1996:8) As the youngest child, Judd always had the feeling that he missed the best in family history: “The Mulvaney family were the family in which everything that happened to them was precious was stored in memory and everyone had a history” (MUV 5). As modern neurobiologists point out, the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashback can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening. (Caruth 1996: 63) In 1993, Corinne organized a Mulvaney family reunion on the 4th of July. Mike Jr. attends with his wife and two children, as do Marianne and Whit with their two babies. Judd arrives; after many years, he sees his brother Patrick, who works at the Berkeley Institute for Child Development. The family fondly remembers things from the past, even their late father.

Furthermore, the main character significantly contributes to achieving her successful liberation from the shackles of psychological trauma, which has burdened her with guilt, shame, and fear. Overcoming these obstacles by breaking the chains of trauma, she discovers a path towards a joyous existence. This study delves into the protagonist's psyche, capturing her anguish and internal battle for a life of freedom. Joyce Carol Oates, a skilled author, provides readers with a realistic experience through her beautiful choice of words and seamless narrative flow, incorporating poignant flashbacks. The quotes from Cathy Caruth, a pioneer of Literary trauma theory, enrich the narrative. Especially reconciliation and the virtue of forgiveness are significant to how Oates is more religious to trust in God.

Once again recalling the traumatic event and its impact that leads to an individual's liberty is a rare occurrence and with a strong impact which consequently directs to the trauma and PTSD. Marianne faces several significant difficulties throughout the story. She experiences a traumatic event when she is sexually assaulted by a classmate, which leads to a rupture within her family as

they grapple with how to respond to the situation. Following the assault, Marianne is sent away from her family to live with distant relatives, essentially exiling her from her home and disrupting her sense of belonging and security. Marianne struggles with feelings of isolation and abandonment as she copes with the aftermath of the assault and the subsequent separation from her family.

The trauma of the assault and exile causes Marianne to lose her sense of self and confidence. She grapples with feelings of shame and guilt, which further isolate her from those around her. Her relationships with her family members become strained as they each cope with their guilt, grief, and inability to protect her. This strains her relationship with her parents and siblings, particularly her brother Patrick, who struggles with feelings of anger and helplessness. Therefore, she faces the challenge of reintegrating into her family and community after her exile, navigating the complexities of forgiveness, healing, and rebuilding trust. These difficulties probably contribute to Marianne's Liberty while facing these challenges she becomes a resilient and liberal woman in society.

This piece of writing delves into the silent battles, internal turmoil, and tumultuous thoughts of the victim, ultimately shaping her into an independent individual who forges her path with a focus on her well-being and aspirations. Joyce Carol Oates starts the story with a confused beginning and with a serene ending.

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