

### Initial remarks after reading the text

The text is evidently narrated by a well-off young American boy who is driving with his mother from a city to their suburban home.

This means that the story is set in 1960s America, after the "white flight": inner cities fell into disrepair and urban decay, abandoned by all but the most impoverished social classes: blacks and recent immigrants, among whom ethnic minorities featured prominently (which is why none of these groups appear in the text, which is set entirely outside the city). Those who could afford to leave moved to freshly-developed satellite towns, attracted by new, clean, convenient housing; hygienic living; space; safety from crime; social and racial homogeneity; a reassuring and wholesome environment for their children to grow up in.

The text narrates a car journey through American suburbs and deals with social classes. The narrative contents of the text are very simple: the narrator is journeying through richer and richer suburbs, so the story it tells is that of a journey that is both geographic and social. Therefore, space and society are central themes of the text. The notion of 'society' covers social classes, but also relationships between individuals, like the narrator and his mother. The link between space and society is also worth studying, since travelling through space also means travelling through society.

The man in the beer ad is described as 'a very American-looking man', which makes him an image (in the visual sense, but also a symbol) of a country. This prompts us to generalise what we have mentioned above: we can study images of America in the text: geographic, social, and cultural images of a nation at a certain point of its history.

The narrative voice and the point of view are essential: they belong to a boy who is inside a moving car. A car is a significant place from which to look at those suburbs, since their development went hand in hand with that of cars. A boy might symbolise innocence, but this one is striking by his lack of innocence: he has absorbed the snobbery of his family; besides he expresses a perverted taste for manifestations of vulgar commercialism. These two aspects of the narrator appear to contradict each other, but they both make him appear corrupt.

Cars are so important that we may imagine the town in whose suburbs the story is set to be Detroit. Detroit, Michigan, is the home of the American motor industry (all three of the largest auto makers are located there: General Motors, Ford, Chrysler), hence its nicknames Motor City and Motown (Mo being short for Motor). In the 1960s, just when the car industry was at its apex, Detroit was also known for its large black population (typical of Northern industrial towns which had attracted former slaves after the Civil War) and for its tense social and ethnic relationships.

Although the text's diction seems mostly straightforward, we need to pay attention to stylistic devices.

- When a word is repeated, the text is not speaking to you, it is shouting at you, so you should not ignore it! The word 'limit' is repeated, so the idea of limits should definitely be examined. It evokes limits between towns and limits between people. The text tells us how limits separate (places and people) but also how limits are crossed : these two aspects need to be studied.
- The names of the towns are probably significant. We need to pay attention to them.
- When the narrator mentions a 'mediocrity which stopped', we think of these words as having an abstract meaning, but when the sentence goes on with 'precisely at the [...] sign that proclaimed: Fernwood Village Limits', we have the impression that the mediocrity or its stopping becomes a physical reality: the meaning of the word is transformed. This is called a metalepsis (plural: metalepses). It is followed by another metalepsis: 'We sped past at sixty' seems to be a commentary on the speed limit mentioned just before, but this speed limit appeared in the story concerning the English teacher, so we have the impression that the road sign jumps from the embedded story to the frame narrative.

### Exemple de commentaire rédigé

*(Les intitulés entre crochets ne doivent pas figurer sur une copie.)*

**[Introduction]** The nineteen sixties, especially its latter half, was a troubled time for the United States, at once the culmination of post-war prosperity, optimism and national self-confidence and, despite economic growth, the starting-point of radical criticism from within. Artists, protest singers, writers, expressed more and more disenchantment with American materialism, injustice and violence, sometimes borrowing from a national Realist tradition, like Joyce Carol Oates in this text.

The text is narrated by a well-off young American boy who is driving with his mother from an unnamed city to their suburban home in the 1960s. It consists in a series of descriptions of what he sees outside the window of the moving car, and short embedded narratives triggered by these images. This description and these narratives are characterised by an emphasis on social class which testifies to a preoccupation with social status, and by the simultaneously enthusiastic and cynical tone of the narrator.

To write a scathingly critical portrait of America, Oates paradoxically chooses the voice of an I-narrator who is also an eye-narrator who at once uncritically reflects his society and appears initiated, even cynical, and may thus symbolise the corruption of childhood innocence. We thus need to analyse how the author's social critique is articulated through a voice which combines an impersonal, sometimes stereotyped, perception, with surprising emotional responses to

a nightmare world, to produce a disenchanted vision of the United States in the 1960s.

The narrator's journey enacts, or ritually reenacts, social ascension through a metaphorical and metonymic drive to a distant suburb: therefore, I will first analyse the relationships between social class and urban space. This will lead me to turn my attention to limits and their crossing in the text and by the text. Finally, I will attempt to show that the text functions as a freakish rewriting of the American dream.

## [1. Space and social class]

[1.1. Suburban space in 1960s USA] The physical space of an American city and its suburbs is structured by class distinctions: in America's suburbia, space is the social scale laid down flat. Thus, the car drive is the symbolic equivalent of scanning or browsing the whole social spectrum: the narrator lists the suburbs he drives through, associating each with the signs which identify the social class that dwells there.

[1.2. Signifying identity] The text is underpinned by how people strive to create, and advertise, an identity for themselves by appropriating signs of belonging to a group and of differentiation from other groups.

The signs which betray social identity may be inadvertent: when the inhabitants of Oak Woods advertise their patriotism by planting American flags on their front lawns, they also reveal that they are 'proletarian'. However, people also deliberately manipulate signs of social standing. Such signs include signs of taste: the architectural styles of the suburbs are supposed to lend them distinction and differentiate them from each other. The narrator carefully separates low-market 'stores' from smarter 'shoppes'. The narrator's father and mother and his teacher discredit inferior social classes because of their supposedly poor aesthetic values: "vulgar", "awful", "slum", "won't do", "conformity", "mediocrity".

Those signs also include references to history: Bunker Hill Towne (which gestures towards the past in two different ways: by referencing Bunker Hill and by choosing the antiquated spelling of 'towne', which is also adopted in 'shoppes'), Waterloo Acres, traditional architectural styles supposed to lend a dignified historical background. Age is a social marker because it is the rarest thing: in the newly-developed suburbs, nothing is old, so old things take on extra value (in this respect, this suburb is a microcosmic USA). Bornwell Pass advertises aristocratic distinction ("born well"), as does, to a lesser extent, Country Club Manor.

[1.3. Identity and difference] The reader can't help noticing that differentiation somehow devolves into identity: at the end of the day, the suburbs' names sound interchangeable, whereas they are meant to tell one from another. Actually, they all sound as if they were thought up by a copywriter to sell these developments. The narrator distinguishes them from the 'anonymous miles of suburban wasteland' but, paradoxically, their very names deprive them of identity and makes them look like "anonymous miles of suburban wasteland" (my emphasis).

[1.4. Spatial and social mobility] As the narrator and his mother are driving away from the city, their journey is up the social scale, starting from the 'proletarian' first suburb all the way to the upper-class ones, in a suburban geography structured by the 'white flight' of the 1960s. This journey actually reenacts white flight itself on a microcosmic scale (a single daily ride home by two people represents the permanent migration of a whole demographic), which may explain the euphoric tone of the narrator: his drive home repeats and confirms his privileged social position.

The car itself is central to the text just as it is central to its themes: the text adopts a point of view located within a car; it points out the presence of car dealers on a section of road which is named after them ('many used-car lots along the "Miracle Motor Mile"'). Cars are so present that we may imagine Detroit (Motor City, whose economy hinges on the car industry) being the city whose suburbs are the setting of the text. Suburban growth, by separating homes from activity, made the car a staple of American society and culture. Thus, the text stages the movements of people in a socially-structured space, which raises the question of the limits which organise this space, limits which can insulate, but which can also be crossed.

## [2. Limits]

The repetition of the word "limit[s]" brings together two different meanings of the word: the descriptive and the normative: "Fernwood village limits" tells viewers where the limits are, while "speed limit" tells them what they should not do. Significantly, the word is used with both meanings on the same road sign.

[2.1. Factual limits] The text keeps reminding the reader that the space it describes is intensely divided ('subdivisions', 'limit[s]') by limits between suburbs which match limits between social classes. They are symbolised and reinforced by social codes which ostensibly legitimise them: the patriotism and racism of the working class, the 'bad' taste of the middle class, the 'good' taste of the upper class. Snobbery is a powerful barrier: taste used as a social marker. The difference between social classes is not recognised in itself but disguised as a difference between good and bad taste.

However, the context makes abundantly clear that the two meanings of the word are interrelated: the "descriptive" village limits of Fernwood mostly serve to tell elegant people from "mediocr[e]" people, while the speed limit is deprived of its normative function since Richard's mother ignores it.

[2.2. Crossing limits] The two metalepses in which the two occurrences of the word 'limit(s)' are couched emphasise this word, its importance and its multiple but interrelated meanings: the abstract meaning of the verb "stops" is transformed into a physical one by the adverbial "at the sign"; then the embedded metaphoric and iterative mention of the "Fernwood village limits" sign is transformed into its specific appearance in the frame narrative by "We sped past at sixty". Metalepsis is itself a form of limit crossing, so that this figure of speech is particularly appropriate here: the narrator

crosses semantic limits just when he mentions how other people are prevented from crossing social limits whereas his own social group feels entitled to cross every limit.

The mother's words and behaviour show how she and people like her are keen on limits which bolster their privileges and disregard limits which curtail their privileges. They are as keen on limiting other people's opportunities as on being immune to any limitations themselves. By crossing the Fernwood village limit sign, where "mediocrity" "stop[s]", she enters her privileged space; by ignoring the speed limit she confirms her limitless sense of entitlement.

[2.3. Distorted limits] Another paradox of protecting social limits is present in the text. Social classes are notoriously concerned by one another in proportion to their proximity, so that their rivalry, hostility or disapproval grows not with distance but with closeness. This classic paradox is expressed in the text by the gradation of Richard's mother's judgments, which gives a topsy-turvy image of the social class of the dwellers of the suburbs: whereas they are driving up the social class, her words might give the impression they are driving down it. It may be worth noticing that she does not start commenting on the surroundings until they have reached middle-class suburbs, as though the working-class did not even exist for her, confirming that when two social classes are far apart, they are hardly concerned by each other.

Richard's mother distorts the image of people's social classes as a result of her paradoxical relationship to limits, which must be closed to some and open to others and become tighter when people are closer. This distortion leads us to examine the freakishness of the portrait of American society painted by the text.

### [3. From America as the country of dreams made true to the country of nightmare and illusion]

The American dream of the United States as a place of limitless possibilities is embodied and symbolised by the car drive through open space: thus the text takes a topos of American culture as its starting point. The American dream is also embodied by the advertising signs in paragraph one and the description of a consumer heaven in paragraph two.

[3.1. The dream of classlessness debunked.] However, the dream is belied by reality. The dream of a classless society represented by open space, of a land of opportunities, clashes with the reality of a "subdivi[ded]" space which mirrors a finely-layered society where the borders between social classes are well guarded by a generalised snobbery: every social class protects its privilege over the class immediately below, from the narrator's upper class all the way down to the white working class whose only social privilege is its skin colour ('proudly white'). The name 'Bornwell Pass', itself a gesture toward aristocratic distinction, illustrates the limitations of the United States' democratic ethos.

[3.2. Consumer society as a degeneration of the American dream] The consumer heaven of paragraph two represents a degeneration of the American dream of *being* what one wants to become into a dream of *having* what the industry wants you to buy: advertising, mentioned in paragraph one, prompts consumption, which appears in paragraph two. Characteristically, the only two billboards precisely mentioned by the narrator are for food and drink, focusing on the most basic operations of the body, and not necessarily the human one. Once the dream of fulfilling one's possibilities has morphed into a nightmare of compelled consumption, drugs (line 14) may be useful to restore a sense of dream, to distort reality and fill the "vacan[cy]" that remains. The text makes it clear that this materialism and commercialism are the face of the United States itself, since the man appearing in the beer advertisement is described as 'very American-looking': he is an image of America itself.

[3.3. Chaos and order: two forms of the same nightmare] Those billboards are located in a chaotic area ("a jumble"), between the city and the suburbs proper: unincorporated<sup>1</sup>, it is neither one thing (city) nor the other (suburb), there is no word for what it is. It is characterised as a space of circulation ('overpasses, underpasses, viaducts') and consumption. This place stands in contrast to the socio-geographic order that reigns in the suburbs; yet it is as nightmarish as they are, suggesting that the American nightmare is made up of two opposite nightmares.

[3.4. From dream to illusion] However harshly the American dream is debunked, it may be even more radically undermined by a sense that reality is replaced by illusion.

The names of the suburbs are deceptive misnomers, they tell of nature and of history, both of which are glaringly absent from the suburbs, which thus appear as an artificial world of recently developed towns from which nature is excluded and with no historic depth. The contrast between the names of the towns and their reality highlights their lack of reality, which is underpinned by commercialism: the names of the towns were obviously chosen by advertisers to help promoters sell their projects.

The disappearance of nature is corroborated when the narrator says "We nearly broke through into the country but it was an illusion", as if the sprawling suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s had squeezed out the American continent's natural environment to replace it with endless artificial towns. The name 'Arcadia Pass' is particularly striking since it conflates a reference to absent nature and the commercial exploitation of a cultural reference, but its thrust is even more complex, since Arcadia refers not to nature itself but to an idealised vision of it, whose unreality echoes the unreality of the suburbs<sup>2</sup>. Inasmuch as 'Arcadia' means 'nature', it is a lie; inasmuch as it means 'illusion', it tells the truth. Thus, it gives a complex image of the town, an image that is at once unlike and like the town.

---

1 Incorporation is the legal creation of a city, town, etc (or any other entity such as a business).

2 [The reader may react in three different ways when he or she reads 'Arcadia Pass':

1) Arcadia = nature, but nature is absent;

2) Arcadia means something for educated people → the name is meant to flatter buyers;

3) Arcadia is not a real country, but an ideal one = its unreality reminds the reader of the unreality of the suburbs.]

[3.5. Cultural degradation] The degrading force at work in 1960s America does not spare culture, which loses its intrinsic value, reduced to either social marker or commodity<sup>3</sup>. The vulgar advertising billboards seen as cultural artefacts show how parodic American culture has become.

The distinction between “shops” and “shoppes”, the architectural styles of the towns have no inherent cultural value: they are used to distinguish oneself from people further down the social ladder; taste is merely a social marker.

[3.5.1. Subversion of language: debasement of reading] Cultural degradation affects reading: the narrator’s reading material is comprised of road signs and vulgar advertising billboards, one of which invites customers to “read a beer can tonight”. Reading thus descends from culture to commerce, and from the mind to the body (a beer can should take the place of a book, drinking should take the place of reading). It may be worth noticing that the English teacher teaches his students to be snobs, as if the purpose of teaching language and literature were not to nurture pupils’ minds but merely to enforce social privilege.

[3.5.2. Subversion of language: loss of communication] The degradation of reading is part of a more general subversion of language. In this context, communication suffers severe distortions. The advertising billboards offer an example of one-way, collective communication, reduced to commercial manipulation. Social norms, snobbery are transmitted implicitly: “we were to understand” indicates that the message is never fully put into words.

Most visibly, the narrator and his mother represent the topos of upper-class people unable to communicate or interact in a healthy way, or even at all. She gestures toward communication but avoids it: she ‘mutters sideways’, speaks ‘vaguely’, asks biased questions which admit of only one answer: ‘Are you happy in Fernwood?’, after twice suggesting the answer: ‘This is a lovely place to live [...] It’s lovely here’. Her son answers obliquely in the third person, probably the closest approximation to a sincere answer he can give such a biased question. Despite the transparency of this transposition, she steers him toward the first person, as if she took the third person literally. Even then, although Richard does not positively say he is happy, merely denying misery, she is satisfied with such an empty answer.

[3.5.3. Subversion of language: narrative illusion] Writing can hardly escape such degradation of culture and communication. The narrator’s uncritical enthusiasm applies to the vulgar, grotesque billboards that ‘garish’ the cityscape, as well as to his mother’s snobbery (‘her attitude cheered me’). He seems to love everything about the world he lives in: he describes how the American dream has turned into a nightmare and yet still treats it as a dream, embracing all its contradictions. The image of the USA is no less nightmarish for being couched in the enthusiastic language of nineteenth-century optimists such as Horatio Alger: “Do you think I could have made up something so marvelous myself? Never, never! America outdoes all its writers”. Just when he describes billboards which mostly advertise the descent of American culture into a parody of itself, his own writing becomes a parody of national literature.

More precisely, the vehicle of the parody is significant, since this vehicle is the claim to debunk the illusion that he is writing fiction. This claim is usually paradoxical: although it effects a descent from fiction to fact, it is enchanting instead of disenchanting. Here, however, this topos of America as a cornucopia which beggars imagination is applied, ironically, to a row of advertising billboards: the narrator claims to be enchanted that the most depressing reality has taken the place of fiction in the same way that Alger and others were enchanted that dreams could transform into reality.

**[Conclusion]** The text produces a deeply disenchanted vision of the United States, which enchants the narrator, and his enchantment enhances the disenchantment of the text since it involves the corruption of the narrator’s point of view. The USA’s self-confidence in the 1960s is a parody of nineteenth-century optimism, and it corrupts the narrative as it corrupts the child who writes it.

Yet the text goes beyond social satire by turning inside out the optimistic self-celebration of America by its national writers, because on the one hand the narrator is not critical but on the other cannot be reduced to a rhetorical ploy used to perform criticism through irony. The reader is forced to look at him from a critical distance, but also to see him as a real character. Although he represents corrupted childhood, he cannot be seen as a villain, but neither can he be reduced to a mere victim. Through him, Oates seems to mourn innocence destroyed by America—a classic American theme.

---

3 [commodity: *marchandise*]