



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

The Dark Side of the American Dream

A Reading of Joyce Carol Oates's Novel *My Life as a Rat* as
Working-Class Literature

Lund University

Dept. of Comparative Literature, Center for Language and Literature

Tutor Erik Zillen

2021-01-15

Lisa M. Timmermand

LIVK10

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”A working-class neighborhood, in which houses begin to darken by 10:00 P.M.”¹

—*My Life as a Rat*, Joyce Carol Oates—

1. Introduction

The American Dream is a world famous concept so often associated with something positive, but is there a darker side to this idea of freedom? What does Marilyn Monroe have in common with the Afro-Americans of the United States? A pursuit of authenticity. Perhaps a resistance to being dominated by white supremacists. Maybe that is what attracted her to Arthur Miller, an author affected by McCarthyism. It is not as difficult however to guess what made Joyce Carol Oates write her famous novel *Blonde* about Norma Jean Baker, made famous as Marilyn Monroe. The whole authorship of Oates’s circulates around politics—women’s rights, racism, class struggles and the U.S. police force. One of her most recent novels, *My Life as a Rat*, is not an exception. In this novel, published during a time when polarization governs the United States, the reader follows a girl as she grows up ostracized from her family because she has been ratting, meaning she broke the news that her brothers killed a black man with a baseball bat. The mere plot creates a debate around race in America, and Oates delves deep into the concept of black and white as the protagonist Violet Rue experiences the flip side of the American Dream—the nightmare of being on your own in an unforgiving world. A literary tradition that has as a mission to portray the lives of the unfortunate is working-class literature, a fluent and changing literary movement and concept. *My Life as a Rat* is set in the 1980’s-1990’s, a time when the working class of the United States was all but gone, replaced by a large middle class. This makes for a difficult debate regarding what social class actually means in the United States, and where to draw the lines. Firstly, Violet Rue becomes a wage worker, working as a house cleaner in the day, so as to finish her degree in social sciences at night. Secondly, she lives through sexual harassment on multiple occasions, and she finds her way in a racist environment. Many of the struggles she faces, and how she overcomes them, indicates that she is the ”new working-class” of the United States, and even though the book is set forty years ago, it still translates to today. For that reason, this thesis concerns the notion that *My Life as a Rat* can be read as American working-class literature.

¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 84.

1.1 Purpose and Questions at Issue

The purpose of this thesis is to suggest a reading of Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* as contemporary American working-class literature. Hence, the main question at issue is: what makes for a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as American working-class literature? What are the characteristics of such literature, and how do they resonate in *My Life as a Rat*? A further purpose for writing this thesis appeared when reading 'Joyce Carol Oates: The Critical Response Matures' by Gerald F. Manning: "There is also the need, however, for readers and critics to share their insights and research for the benefit of other readers, and there is no question that in the case of an artist like Oates it is time for a first assessment."² This thesis aims to be a contribution to current research into what contemporary American working-class literature might be today by offering a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature.

² Gerald F. Manning, 'Joyce Carol Oates: The Critical Response Matures', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Volume 14, Number 2, Summer 1983, p. 225.

1.2 Theory and Method

Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* was published in 2019 by 4th Estate, and it is this edition that is quoted and referred to in the thesis. Originally, *My Life as a Rat* was published sporadically as short stories, later on to be collected into one coherent book in 2019. The prevalence of theories of literature commonly used in analyzing working-class literature are applied to *My Life as a Rat* in order to conduct a reading of the novel as American working-class literature. Such theories include a gender criticism, critical race theory and also a psychoanalytic literary criticism on Oates's relationship to her own writing. Due to the hybrid nature of working-class literature as a tradition, previous and contemporary research on the field is discussed first, before applying these secondary texts on *My Life as a Rat*. Several literary scholars argue that working-class literature is a genre that it is marginalized and largely un-theorized. This has been taken into account, along with the notion that a widening of perspectives is currently occurring within the field of research of global working-class literature.

This Bachelor thesis provides a reading of Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* as contemporary U.S. working-class literature, and to support that idea three criteria will be discussed in this analysis. Firstly there is a gender debate on how being woman and being working-class differs from the traditional notion of the working-class stereotype being white and male. Secondly, the prevalence of race as a class creator will be discussed in relation to *My Life as a Rat*, and how that affects the political nature of the book. Thirdly, drawing on research both into Oates's authorship and into theories of i.e. psychoanalysis, the importance of Oates's personal background and history will be taken into account when reading *My Life as a Rat* as a working-class novel. The importance of the idea and phenomenon of the American Dream is also closely related to American working-class literature, and this will be discussed in the section "Being an American Dreamer".

Regarding research done on the actual primary text *My Life as a Rat* almost nothing has been written as of yet. Published in 2019, it is a new novel, and research available today are mainly reviews. One such review, written by David Lührssen, is worth mentioning. He supports this thesis when in the *Shepherd Express* calling the protagonist "a working class girl from the unpromising Rust Belt town of South Niagara."³ Other reviews also confirm the protagonist Violet Rue as a working-class girl. In general however, there are a rather large amount of research done into

³ David Lührssen, <https://shepherdexpress.com/arts-and-entertainment/books/with-my-life-as-a-rat-joyce-carol-oates-examines-silence/> (read 10th November 2020).

Oates's long career as an author, some of which are discussed in the following section called "Previous Research".

Concerning research into the working-class literary theory itself, certain names stand out. As mentioned, this theory is seen by some scholars as un-theorized, meaning it is not as structured and established as other existing literary theories and criticisms. Since working-class literature tends to be seen as a hybrid genre, often inclusive of sub-genres such as bildungsroman, diary novel et al, it becomes both easier and harder to classify a text as working-class literature. This is much ado with the changing nature of working-class literature itself, and of the modern concept of class. For instance, U.S. working-class all but have merged into the middle-class today. As one of the working-class literary tradition's main missions is to reflect upon and mirror its contemporary society, books from the 1930's golden age of working-class literature around the globe, and perhaps most prominently in countries like the Nordics, U.K. and U.S., stand in rather stark contrast to working-class literature of today. Due to this hybrid nature, scholars have previously used a range of literary theories to analyze texts, with Marxist literary theory dominating the scene. Regarding research into working-class literature, scholars Ben Clarke and Nick Hubble highlights the notion that revisionism is an important component in the strive toward a working-class literary theory. In *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice* Clarke and Hubble argue that "Struggles over definitions necessarily occur in a variety of cultural spaces, and, within universities, across a range of disciplines."⁴ They mean that the working-class literary tradition and any potential future theory depends on scholarly work needed today: "the production, reading, and analysis of literature is central to this process, that it can make a distinct, valuable contribution to the understanding not only of working-class histories but the category 'working class' itself, and that a greater critical attention to class, and the working class in particular, would extend both the methods and object of literary studies."⁵ Thoughts like these are the theory and method of this thesis; to understand contemporary U.S. working-class literature by suggesting a reading of Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* as working-class.

Two scholars researching the definition of working-class literature are Swedish Magnus Nilsson and American John Lennon. In 2017 Nilsson and Lennon published their book *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* in which they aim to highlight how "research about working-class literature is often fragmented according to language barriers or

⁴ Ben Clarke & Nick Hubble, *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice*, New York: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid.

myopic views of nation states”.⁶ For this thesis, focus is on Irish-American working-class literature, but it is important to bear in mind the global and international perspective offered by Nilsson and Lennon too, as it is reflected in each nation. The mere notion that what unites is more important than what divides promotes a global debate of comparative literature. By doing so, they intend to widen the definition of working-class literature.⁷ This widening in perspective invites more works of literature both of the present and of the past, such as *My Life as a Rat*, into the working-class genre.

⁶ John Lennon & Magnus Nilsson, 2017. Introduction. In: Lennon, John & Nilsson, Magnus (eds.) *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives*, Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, p. xiii.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. xvii.

1.3 Previous Research

In his book *Joyce Carol Oates Samtal med Stig Björkman* Swedish writer and critic Stig Björkman includes an essay on Oates's authorship. He suggests she has a mission with all her writing—a project to portray the modern day United States of America.⁸ Throughout her many years as an author, Oates has indeed covered numerous corners of her giant homeland. With her words, she paints pictures of everything from Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* to people in the margin of society such as Violet Rue in *My Life as a Rat*. Along with Björkman, numerous other scholars have covered Oates's long career, and there are many analysis available on her novels. In her 'Gothicizing American History: Religion, Race, and Politics in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Accursed*' for example, Nilanjana Ghosal returns to one of Oates's recurring themes: "the discriminatory ideology of America's classic Religious Right."⁹ When comparing for instance *The Accursed* to *My Life as a Rat*, not only the debate on race and religion, but also the retrospective approach, is a common denominator. By setting her plots in the past Oates invites her readers to draw their own parallels to today, and echoing the words of Ben Clarke, avoiding the "inherent opposition between art and politics.", as he writes in his essay 'Working-Class Writing and Experimentation'.¹⁰ Literary critics have analyzed her work since the early 1960's, and just like there are difficulties defining working-class literature, critics have also struggled with defining Oates's literature. As Manning writes in "Joyce Carol Oates: The Critical Response Matures" scholars have compared her work with "naturalists, with Southern Gothic writers like Flannery O'Connor, with realists who anatomize contemporary urban society."¹¹ Although Manning wrote this back in 1983, his words about Oates's extensive work resonates in *My Life as a Rat* when discussing her recurring themes: "the loss of a sense of community, whether families, cities or nations."¹² Manning describes Oates as an artist, a word relevant to the discussion of literature. A reader of a book actively partake in the work of art, hence research into Oates is research into not only an author of books, but a highly conscious artist. Just like Claude Monet had recurrent themes in his painting, like the water lilies,

⁸ Stig Björkman, *Joyce Carol Oates Samtal med Stig Björkman*, Stockholm: Alfabeta, 2005, p. 171.

⁹ Nilanjana Ghosal, 'Gothicizing American History: Religion, Race, and Politics in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Accursed*, *IUP Journal of English Studies*, Volume 15 Issue 2, June 2020, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ben Clarke, 'Working-Class Writing and Experimentation' in Clarke, Ben & Hubble, Nick, *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice*, New York: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017, p. 17.

¹¹ Gerald F. Manning, 'Joyce Carol Oates: The Critical Response Matures', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Volume 14, number 2, Summer 1983, p. 225.

¹² Ibid. p. 226.

Oates returns to themes of violence and isolation. People in the margin of society, working-class people, are often the victim of such struggles.

In November 2020 Swedish literary critic Rasmus Landström published an analysis on the revival of contemporary working-class literature in Sweden. The book is in this moment of writing not yet translated into English, but the title *Arbetarlitteraturens återkomst* means "the return of working-class literature". Landström says that in Sweden, working-class literature has gone from depicting the lives of blue-collar workers to now concern female county council workers.¹³ His book spans the beginnings of Swedish proletarian writers in the 1910's to the so-called dirty realism of the 1990's. Although working-class literature's place in society, the sociology of the literature, varies widely globally, a similar development is to be seen in U.S. working-class literature. Although the working-class might be diminishing, the "new worker" within the field of services as opposed to the industry workers are flourishing. Such a service worker is Violet Rue in *My Life as a Rat*.

¹³ <https://www.bokus.com/bok/9789189155084/arbetarlitteraturens-aterkomst/> (read 7th January 2021).

2. Analysis

It was not until after the Russian revolution of 1917 that proletarian literature as we know it came to the United States.¹⁴ It took up pace in the 1930's, a golden age for working-class literature in certain countries like Sweden. Unlike Swedish proletarian literature for instance, where authors who wrote this type of literature tended to come from the working-class themselves, "proletarian literature is measured by the articulation of a specific proletarian point of view, the production of a new subjectivity."¹⁵ In the U.S., where the class concept is different to Sweden, this was often done by outside observers rather than by the workers themselves, and this mere function of literature inevitably makes it political in nature. To state an example of how important each nation's existing class structure is when conducting a working-class literary critique, taking a look at Sweden aristocracy is still existing, and in the 1930's its presence in society was more obvious. Hence the definition of 'working-class' is different in Sweden than in the U.S. There is no such thing as a U.S. aristocracy, much ado with the idea of the American Dream. There is however a very large middle-class, considered to be the backbone of society. For this reason there never actually was a golden age of American working-class literature per se, as Ben Clarke states in 'Working-Class Writing and Experimentation': "The literature of the nineteen-thirties is conventionally seen as a failed experiment."¹⁶ Since this was an important time for working-class literature as a genre, considering the Great Depression and other circumstances, it affected the way scholars have been theorizing the concept.

When writing a review on *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* by Sonali Perera, literary scholar Michelle Tokarczyk says that "Working-class writing is still a neglected and under-theorized genre. Associations with it follow a familiar and reductive pattern: literature written about, and often by, white men from the global North."¹⁷ Perera's book makes an attempt at widening the concept of the working-class literary genre by shedding light on working-class writings from the southern hemisphere too such as India and Sri Lanka. This broadening of horizons to include more novels into the genre than those written by white males from the North is

¹⁴ Janet Zandy, *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings : an Anthology*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, April, 1990, Ibid. p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ben Clarke, 'Working-Class Writing and Experimentation' in Clarke, Ben & Hubble, Nick, *Working-Class Writing: Theory and Practice*, New York: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017, p. 17.

¹⁷ Michelle Tokarczyk, *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* by Sonali Perera (review), *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Volume 43, Issue 4, December 2016, p. 586.

one way for contemporary literary scholars to pave the way toward a definition of working-class literature. Reading Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* is another attempt at using contemporary literature to widen the concept of what working-class literature might be. Although written by a white person from the North, Oates is not a male factory worker. She is a woman using a working-class protagonist in her fiction in order to bring forward the issues of gender, race and national identity in the contemporary United States. These three issues brought forward in *My Life as a Rat* will be discussed in the following analysis, beginning with a gender debate on Being Female and Being Working-Class. Race as a class creator and its close relation to working-class literature is discussed in "Being Black in the United States", and finally the last part of the analysis will discuss the U.S. national identity and the American Dream in "Being an American Dreamer".

2.1 Being Female and Being Working-Class

Set in the 1980's and 1990's rust belt America, the plot of *My Life as a Rat* can be seen as echoing the polarized state of the country, even today. This polarization regards not only democrats and republicans, but also black people and white people, men and women, working-class and middle-class. Seeing as the protagonist Violet Rue is a white Irish-American woman, studying her background reveals the importance of understanding the position of Americans with Irish descent in the United States. Irish migrants arrived in the United States "from the mid-nineteenth century, when the great wave of Irish emigration to America in the wake of the great famine began", as Margaret Hallissy and John Lutz explain in 'The View from Below: Solidarity and Struggle in Irish-American Working-Class Literature'.¹⁸ Although Violet Rue is more or less fourth generation American, her Irish ancestors reportedly arrived in the United States in the 1930's from Galway in Ireland, her Irish roots and her pale white skin comes to shape her whole life. As Irish-American, she is also a catholic, and she grows up attending church with her mother, confessing her sins to pastor Gravy. In the first part of the novel, Oates paints a society with distinctly different gender roles, and already as a twelve-year-old girl Violet Rue knows she is different from her brothers. Different expectations are put upon her, and it becomes painstakingly obvious this is the work of her father Jerome: "To daddy the world was harshly divided: male, female".¹⁹ The sentiment you get as a reader is that of a patriarchal order of things, that her father's love is conditional: "It was a protective love, a wish to cherish but also a wish to control, even coerce."²⁰

Hallissy and Lutz argue that there are certain themes recurring in Irish-American working-class literature; "writers in the Irish-American tradition stress the dignity of the worker and depict the upper classes negatively."²¹ Taking a look at Violet Rue's mother, Lula Kerrigan certainly holds a grudge toward people she considers to be upper class. These sentiments become obvious when Violet Rue makes friends with a girl from school who lives in the uptown of South Niagara, in the better part of town, daughter to a doctor in a large house. As Lula insists on driving past the house of Violet Rue's friend, Geraldine Pyne, she angrily points out she used to clean such houses before she married her father: "as a girl she'd cleaned 'the God-damned' houses in this neighborhood. Rich

¹⁸ Margaret Hallissy & John Lutz, 'The View from Below: Solidarity and Struggle in Irish-American Working-Class Literature', *A history of Irish working-class writing* edited by Michael Pierse, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 209.

¹⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 16.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

²¹ Ibid. p. 210.

people's houses. She'd had to quit school at sixteen, her family had needed the income."²² As a reader, you might assume that Lula Kerrigan felt she lost her dignity, and that she gained a negative view of the upper classes of her area. Violet Rue's father also expressed negative feelings toward the upper class: "my father spoke resentfully of "money people" ".²³ Indeed, Jerome Kerrigan also tended to speak resentfully to his own wife too. Due to the rules and laws of Catholicism, contraception and divorce was ruled out, and for this reason men cheated on their wives with their marriage intact; "They had that kind of marriage—the wife stays at home. The man screws around."²⁴ Oates portrays a scenario where this was a common family set-up among Catholic working-class Irish-Americans: "Every woman she knew who was married had the same experience. She couldn't have left Dad even if she'd wanted to, she had no income. All she'd ever done was 'keep house'—take care of children."²⁵ It is from this upbringing, these family dynamics, that Violet Rue is pushed out into the world of independence as she is sent into exile, abandoned by her family at age twelve. In part three of *My Life as a Rat* her past comes back to haunt her. Alike her mother, she becomes a cleaning lady, and very soon a kept lady. This is when the Madonna/Whore dichotomy becomes paramount to the plot.

Within the field of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud coined the term Madonna/Whore Complex, the foundation of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Put in a working-class context, this concept of the male mind creates the perfect playground for a rich male to abuse a poor female, as becomes the case when doctor Orlando Metti commences an intimate relationship with his housemaid Violet Rue Kerrigan. With time, Metti's "desire for the *sorrowful virgin/Madonna*"²⁶ changes to the desire for the fantasy of her as a woman sleeping with multiple black males. The swift move from telling her "You are so beautiful. So sad. Like the *Sorrowful Madonna*—or maybe—*Sorrowful Virgin*"²⁷, comparing her with Italian Renaissance artwork, to calling her "*Bitch. Slut. Lying Cunt.*"²⁸ emphasize how vulnerable women are in the capitalist environment of the United States. This is not the first time Violet Rue learns about the mind of the predatory male. During her time in Port Oriskany with her aunt, her uncle Oscar also underwent a transformative period going from seeing

²² Ibid. p. 89.

²³ Ibid. p. 86.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 359.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 323.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 291.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 331.

her as an innocent virgin to a promiscuous slut. After having been sexually abused by the notorious pervert Mr. Sandman, Violet Rue became the victim of her uncle's unwanted sexual attention. Mr. Sandman was also a male who suffered from the Madonna/Whore Complex. Trying to wake her up after having sedated her he called her: "Sleeping Beauty! Time to open those beautiful myopic eyes"²⁹ whereas while she was sedated, telling her "*Don't pretend, Vio-let Rue. Dirty girl!*"³⁰ This swift movement from seeing her as an innocent girl to treating her as a promiscuous slut is identical in Orlando Metti, Oscar Allyn and Mr. Sandman. The desire for both the virgin and the promiscuous and the dissatisfaction with both. The virgin madonna represent the good woman and the slut represent the bad woman, and the male wants to harm them both. Violet Rue quickly learns to play both roles as she is forced to grow up all too early and all too fast.

The Catholic Church surely has a part to play in how the Madonna/Whore dichotomy played out in the 1980's-1990's United States, and so does social class. Even though Irish-Americans could claim not to belong to any social class, post code envy and socio-economic prerequisites are but some markers of differences in social class. It is possible, even likely, that men like Metti, Allyn and Sandman considered Violet Rue a working-class girl and therefore an easy prey. In suggesting a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature, it is of interest to bear in mind that Irish heritage of, in this case, catholicism. In her dissertation 'Toward a Theory of Working Class Literature : Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scot's Quair* in the Context of Earlier Working Class Literature' (1992) Olivia Michael joins other scholars in the previously mentioned notion that working-class literature largely is left un-theorized.³¹ Rather than phrasing it as un-theorized however, a revival and revisionist approach might be more accurate today. Seeing as working-class literature is a direct reflection of each nation's class structure, the working-class theory aims to be adaptable in nature. This theory is not only dependent upon the primary text but also the environment in which the text was created. For this reason a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature is also a reflection upon the America in which it was created. The way in which Michael spans time periods using contemporary ideas of fluidity applying the working-class literary theory to older novels such as Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scot's Quair* echoes thoughts of other scholars in the field who aim to re-think and revive the tradition by defining more and more both old and contemporary novels as working-class literature.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 188.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 190.

³¹ Olivia Michael, https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/318/1/uk_bl_ethos_413218.pdf, Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1992.

2.2 Being Black in the United States

The tradition of American working-class literature is closely related to the issue of race, and the issue of race in the U.S. is closely related to the issue of the American Dream. Self-determination, to own one's own destiny, is at the core of this dream, yet black Americans arrived to the U.S. as slaves with no self-determination at all. This provokes the thought that the American Dream is a subjective concept, and Tyrell in *My Life as a Rat* may function as a symbol of this. He was also bullied by Mr. Sandman, just like the girls, but for the sake of the color of his skin. He decided not to be put in a folder—he owned his destiny and became one of the rare black professors of economics at a New York State university. Portraying Violet Rue Kerrigan as an 'awakened' woman and American free from judgements, she suitably falls in love with him and develops a healthy relationship with him and her dog Brindle toward the end of the novel: "Tyrell, protective by instinct, is quick to assure you that it's wonderful news you are returning home sooner than you'd planned—Brindle has been pining for you" are the last words of the novel.³²

In his 'The Race of Class: The Role of Racial Identity Production in the Long History of U.S. Working-Class Writing'³³, Benjamin Balthaser emphasizes the creation of American social class as interwoven with the question of race. Phrasing it as a creation of class, Balthaser touches on something both important and current in relation to for instance the Black Lives Matter-movement in 2020, three years post writing his essay, namely the creation of American social class identity. Our contemporaneous society is one of polarization, something Oates portrays in *My Life as a Rat*. Talking about the past, American working-class literature began as a response to "the extension of bondage to white men", and that accounts written by slaves therefore might be the first working-class literature of the United States.³⁴ Slavery is engrained in American history, and has served as a foundation for class creation. Even though slaves had been arriving to America from Africa since far back in time, working-class writings of the nineteenth century "was literature *about* working-class people, seldom by them and even more rarely, from their perspective.", perhaps due to the fact that most slaves had little opportunity to narrate their own experiences.³⁵ Race as a class creator is

³² Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 402.

³³ Benjamin Balthaser, "The Race of Class: The Role of Racial Identity Production in the Long History of U.S. Working-Class Writing" in: Lennon, J. And Nilsson, M. (eds.) *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2017, p. 31.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 36.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 37.

something Oates debates in *My Life as a Rat* as she paints the picture of a polarized 1980's and 1990's America: white people against black people. Unfortunately, not much has changed in the intervening years.

In *My Life as a Rat*, the chapter called "Mr. Sandman bring me a dream" is not just a chapter on loneliness and sexual abuse of a minor, but it is also a chapter about American racism. Violet Rue's math teacher Mr. Sandman is a white supremacist and neo-nazi who sees females as the weaker sex: "Girls have no 'natural aptitude' for math. There is no reason for girls to know math at all. Especially algebra—of no earthly use for a female."³⁶ Hence, when Mr. Sandman finds Violet Rue hiding from bullying boys in his car, she becomes the perfect new victim. He degrades her not only by her gender, but also by her social status: "A subtle tone of condescension in Mr. Sandman's voice. For the *east side* of Port Oriskany was not nearly so affluent as the *west side* nearer Lake Ontario."³⁷ He knows where she lives with her aunt Irma and uncle Oscar, and to him they live in the poorer part of town. Her race is not a reason for condescension however, as Mr. Sandman admires the Irish white. Oates uses the character of Mr. Sandman to emphasize the strained relationship between white and black Americans in certain parts of the United States: "Your white skin has made you an enemy in some quarters. If not a 'double enemy'—a traitor to your race."³⁸ he tells Violet Rue regarding how she got her brothers in prison for killing a black man. To Mr. Sandman, that is a betrayal toward her own race. A race that, to him, is superior to people of different skin colors. He goes on measuring her body and taking photos of her, as if he was a racial biologist, and he says with the perceived pride of a neo-nazi: "It is a fact kept generally secret in the United States that Adolf Hitler acquired his 'controversial' ideas on race and on the problems posed by race from us—the United States. Our history of slavery, and post-slavery, as well as our 'population management' of Indians—on reservations in remote parts of the country."³⁹ It is obvious that Mr. Sandman is a right-wing extremist and fascist, and naturally against liberalism. To him, humans were not created as equals, to him humans were made unequal. For this reason, Mr. Sandman does not believe in integration either: "With *integration* comes *disintegration*. Some Negroes wish to dilute the white race by interbreeding"⁴⁰ With an almost dystopian tone, Mr.

³⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 161.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 170.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 173.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 179.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 182.

Sandman declares that "One day there will be a race war"⁴¹, adding that Violet Rue's brothers Jerome Jr. and Lionel sacrificed themselves in this 'war' by killing Hadrian Johnson.

Andrew Lawson has written extensively on American class identities and how the concept of class changes over time, but also how class stands in contrast to other factors: "race and gender as primary determinants of identity".⁴² In *My Life as a Rat* Violet Rue's mother Lula Kerrigan noted that the "black maids would work for less money than we could so after a while, there wasn't any white girls working on Highgate. I doubt there's any 'white help' in South Niagara today."⁴³ Although black and white maids are equal in gender identity, they are unequal in race identity. This racial inequality affects the women's economy, as Lula Kerrigan observes. Interesting to note however, both the white maids like Lula Kerrigan and the black maids are from the working-class. This confirms the statement by Janet Zandy that "Class identity is easier to obscure and deny than gender and race identity."⁴⁴ This can be seen in Violet Rue's spiritual maturation, as Oates states toward the end of the novel that "your white skin signals that you are looking for an employee of your family, a cleaning woman perhaps. Not a friend, and employee. You feel a wave of shame, the woman has judged you by the color of your skin. Of course it's a reasonable assumption. You understand."⁴⁵ What Violet Rue really was doing was wanting to visit the mother of murdered Hadrian Johnson, to tell her that she was the one sending her money every Valentine's Day. Instead she was met by this assumption from a black neighbor of Mrs. Johnson's. Although Oates is more of an artist than a debater as she is not clearly or explicitly expressing her views, she shows proof of a great ability to put herself in the shoes of black people in the United States: "Have to assume, a black man in a white world sees more than he feels obliged to acknowledge."⁴⁶ Indeed, Oates is advocating for the importance of knowledge when on the last pages saying that "this is the perfect revenge: knowledge. Not emotion, not the waywardness of desire, or the ecstatic joy of violence,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Andrew Lawson, *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal*, London: Routledge, 2018, p. 3.

⁴³ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 92.

⁴⁴ Janet Zandy, *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings : an Anthology*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, April 1990, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 397.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 380.

but rather knowledge, and the power of knowledge.”⁴⁷ Considering these quotes, Oates poses the problem of race in the United States, and offers a solution.

2.3 Being an American Dreamer

There are scholars of contemporary working-class literature in the United States that believe the author’s actual background to be of paramount importance, as John Lennon writes in ‘Defining Working-Class Literature(s): A Comparative Approach Between U.S. Working-Class Studies and Swedish Literary History’.⁴⁸ Since working-class literature is political in essence, the long-lasting red scare and McCarthyism is thought to have played a part in it being marginalized in the United States.⁴⁹ It is not for nothing that the fear of communism was called the red *scare*, for the Cold War years truly were a time of paranoia. Mere guilt by association placed American working-class literature on the back shelves, as opposed to countries with different political landscapes such as Sweden where working-class literature enjoys a completely different status. The marginalization of working-class literature in the United States can therefore also be seen as an inability to distinguish the artist from the artwork, or in this case the author from the book. The fluid definition of the working-class literary genre, which is a global phenomenon, could in the future offer a way around this problem in the case of working-class literature. Learning to differentiate between author and fictional text, readers might become less ‘scared’ to associate with working-class literature in the United States. Being born in 1938, Oates was nine years old when the second red scare in the United States began, and nineteen when it ended in 1957. To what extent this affected her and her writing can only be speculated.

One such opening for speculation on the relationship between author and book is to consider epistemology in relation to literary studies. Nand Kishore Acharya writes in ‘Form: The Epistemology of Literature’ that “if literature is an independent process of metaphysical and ethical inquiry, then we need to investigate this process and its tools.”⁵⁰ To read *My Life as a Rat* as

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 402.

⁴⁸ John Lennon & Magnus Nilsson, ‘Defining Working-Class Literature(s): A Comparative Approach Between U.S. Working-Class Studies and Swedish Literary History’, *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April 2016, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 48.

⁵⁰ Nand Kishore Acharya, ‘Form: The Epistemology of Literature’, *Indian Literature*, Vol.44, No. 2, 2000, p. 179.

working-class literature therefore enables the novel to become a source of truth, as Acharya claims that literature is no different than science or philosophy in being a source of knowledge. Upon investigating tools, it is important to mention *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates 1973-1982*. Along with the reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature, reading the author's journals also offers an insight into her process of thinking. Oates states that "The Soul dictates to the ego. If the Ego begins to imagine itself autonomous, something will rise up out of the unconscious to humiliate it; or worse. The dream was unmistakable, more "real" than "real." I don't believe I've had more than three or four numinous (Jung's word) dreams in my lifetime."⁵¹ In *My Life as a Rat*, Violet Rue is not only growing as a woman, but she is also growing spiritually. Toward the end of the novel she expresses a desire to live life meditatively, and she finds herself a "home" at last. A journey toward enlightenment need not begin with a broken person and end with an enlightened individual. In *My Life as a Rat* Violet Rue was a happy girl in the beginning, considering herself having had a happy childhood. Toward the end of the novel she is not enlightened, but she is beginning to find her place in the world. The journey toward enlightenment begins with an increased conscience, and this development is seen in *My Life as a Rat*. This makes for the novel to be a bildungsroman, a type of writing common in the working-class literature tradition. In *A History of the Bildungsroman* Sarah Graham says that "The emphasis on 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' established by the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the image of the USA as the 'land of the free and the home of the brave', enshrined in its national anthem, 'The Star-Spangled Banner' (1814), are embodied in protagonists who overcome obstacles to achieve triumphant self-realization. Their victories affirm the validity of the 'American Dream', which holds that all citizens can improve their circumstances, however deprived their origin"⁵² This statement inevitably leads to the necessary debate on the American Dream as a concept in relation to a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature.

Oates is an enlightened woman, or at least a conscious woman, able to be both an Ivy League Princeton professor and a working-class woman. Her personal background, upbringing and family history enables her to see life from both the lens of a woman with working-class roots and an intellectual with insight. She knows how to breathe both on land and on water, and this is what makes her an amphibian writer. As such, she is also a citizen of the United States, and in her writings she shows proof of a great awareness of the American Dream and its manifestations in

⁵¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates 1973-1982*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, p. 5.

⁵² Sarah Graham, *A History of the Bildungsroman*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 117.

society. To understand a dream is to understand a vision, and since Oates herself said that she has had numinous dreams, perhaps even the American Dream can be seen as numinous. The phenomena is certainly closely connected to the concept of class and class definition in the United States, and by that, working-class literature. American singer Woody Guthrie, the man with the text 'This machine kills fascists' written across his acoustic guitar, wrote the famous song 'This Land is Your Land', and during a Bruce Springsteen concert, right before Springsteen is about to sing Guthrie's song, he says that this is what the country was supposed to be about. In its pure form, the American Dream is about equal opportunity for all: a meritocracy. Because of racism in the United States, racism that Oates highlights in *My Life as a Rat*, that dream collapsed. It is unclear who coined the phrase, but a strong contestant is James Truslow Adams. In his introduction to *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* Jim Cullen states that "For Adams, no theme was more important than what he called "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank" "53 Cullen continues to ponder the contemporary American Dream as opposed to that of the Great Depression on Adams's time; "In the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may well be greater than ever before."54 When considering how Oates brings to debate current societal problems of the United States in *My Life as a Rat*, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and #metoo, Cullen's words are put in concrete context. The contemporary uncertainty of what makes the national identity reflects in both problems with racism and gender inequalities. Within the field of international relations, nation building is often discussed when talking about ethnic conflicts, and perhaps the American Dream of today has become more and more connected to the concept of nation building. Donald Trump did, for example, use the slogan "Make America Great Again" in his electoral campaign. Joe Biden also turned to the notion of the American nation in his presidential pledge when winning the election in November 2020: "For that is what America is about: The people. And that is what our Administration will be about. I sought this office to restore the soul of America. To rebuild the backbone of the nation - the middle class."55

Within the scholarly field of working-class literature, researchers are aware that class structures are unique to each country, and therefore working-class literature is also unique to each country. In

53 Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 4.

54 Ibid. p. 6.

55 Joe Biden, <https://joebiden.com/presidency-for-all-americans/> (read 29th November 2020).

the case of U.S. working-class literature, Joe Biden's words are of essence; the backbone of the nation today is the middle class. The U.S. working-class have merged with the U.S. middle-class. The middle-class is a working class, and dividing lines are blurred. The same goes when considering Oates and the importance of her background in relation to her novels. The relationship between artist and artwork is perhaps most obvious when considering Violet Rue's spiritual growth throughout the novel. In her journal, Oates writes on May 24, 1977 that she is "Struggling with "Sentimental Education." Perhaps it's simply too difficult to do: dealing w/ adolescence, the "awakening of love" etc., etc. How to write of adolescents without lapsing into an adolescent spirit or style. A challenge indeed, but one that might overcome me. Fifty pages accomplished; but the prospect of fifty more is sobering. Do I really want to continue..."⁵⁶ In *My Life as a Rat*, written some forty-two years later, Oates has succeeded in her quest.

In the case of *My Life as a Rat* and Oates, the circumstances are also ambiguous regarding where to draw the line between artist and artwork. On the one hand, Oates can be seen as the intellectual Princeton professor writing about the life of working-class Violet Rue with an outside perspective. On the other hand, Oates can also be seen as an Irish-American woman from a humble farming background in Niagara adding personal experiences into her fiction in *My Life as a Rat*. Indeed, there are numerous indicators in her novel suggesting certain autobiographical tendencies. For example, Oates is a dedicated runner, and so is Violet Rue. She also bears physical resemblance to her protagonist; dark curly hair, pale skin and a skinny figure. Bearing in mind the quote from her journal above, perhaps wanting to or not Oates is capable of imagining herself being in the marginalized adolescent's shoes. Other scholars have acknowledged her interest in spirituality and mysticism, and this might have increased her ability to feel empathy with her characters, developing their depths. Previous research into Oates's authorship has also shown her affiliation with the human psychology, often exploring the dark side of humanity. Whether or not it reflects herself, she writes in *My Life as a Rat* that Violet Rue is "in love with loneliness, melancholy. Happiness is not reliable. Melancholy is reliable."⁵⁷ Oates is also contemplating the nature of human memory: "So unreliable is memory, so surreal." Reading her journals makes one think she bases her characters on her own visions, contemplations and thoughts. An insight is offered into her preoccupation with psychology when reading what she wrote on the 7th of January 1973:

⁵⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates 1973-1982*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, p. 197.

⁵⁷ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 386.

Fascinating, the human mind; unfathomable. To think that we inhabit the greatest, most ingenious work in the universe... that is, the human brain... and we inhabit it gracelessly, casually, rarely aware of the phenomenon we've inherited. Like people living in a few squalid rooms, in a great mansion. We don't even know what might await us on the highest floor, we're stuck contemplating the patterns in the floorboards before us. Once in a while a truly alarming, profound dream/vision cracks through the barrier and we're forced to recognize the presence of a power greater than ourselves, contained somehow within our consciousness.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, *The Journal of Joyce Carol Oates 1973-1982*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, p. 197.

3. Conclusion

To conclude the thesis, a reading of Oates's novel *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature has been done in three stages. Gender, race and national identity are debating points frequently seen in U.S. working-class literature, and of essence for the reading of *My Life as a Rat*. As mentioned in the introduction, many of the struggles Violet Rue faces, and how she overcomes them, indicates that she is the "new working-class" of the United States, and even though the book is set forty years ago, many of the issues it puts forward translates to today. For that reason, this thesis concerns the notion that *My Life as a Rat* can be read as American working-class literature. Supposedly being a somewhat un-theorized genre, innovation and pioneering is welcomed by literary scholars looking to define a theory. Due to the nature of working-class literary theory being affected by progressivism unique to each nation, an opening appeared for a revisionist approach to be applied, something that has benefitted this thesis. Repeating the words of Manning; "There is also the need, however, for readers and critics to share their insights and research for the benefit of other readers, and there is no question that in the case of an artist like Oates it is time for a first assessment."⁵⁹

Conducting a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature is therefore not only about listing recurrent themes and characteristics of working-class writings, but also about widening the existing concept in order to share insights beneficial for future readers of not only *My Life as a Rat* or other novels by Oates, but also for readers to rethink the concept of working-class literature and class structures. Having studied both literary scholars analyzing Oates's work, and Oates's own journals and *My Life as a Rat*, it seems possible to add to the list of her recurring themes this: the human ignorance. As a professor she highly values knowledge, and to distill the meaning of *My Life as a Rat* it is an ode to knowledge. She fundamentally disarms the saying that ignorance is bliss, depicting a spiritual journey toward pure conscience and enlightenment. Oates is an artist expressing her passions, including religion, in her artworks. *My Life as a Rat* explores Christianity, and the harmful deeds done in the name of God. But she also makes sure to offer an approach that honors faith through the way Violet Rue overcomes her struggles without becoming broken or bitter, nor revengeful. It is as she says, knowledge is the best revenge. Perhaps the most suitable conclusion to this thesis on a reading of *My Life as a Rat* as working-class literature is the following quote from the book where Violet Rue describes a desire to live life meditatively.

⁵⁹ Gerald F. Manning, 'Joyce Carol Oates: The Critical Response Matures', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Volume 14, number2, Summer 1983, p. 225.

”My wish is to live a life in which emotions come slowly as clouds on a calm day. You see the approach, you contemplate the beauty of the cloud, you observe it passing, you let it go. You do not dwell upon what you have seen, you do not regret it. You are content to understand that the identical cloud will never come again, no matter how beautiful, unique. You do not weep at its loss.”⁶⁰

—*My Life as a Rat*, Joyce Carol Oates—

⁶⁰ Joyce Carol Oates, *My Life as a Rat*, London: 4th Estate, 2019, p. 362.

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