

Repressed sexuality in joyce carol oates' "haunted"



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Joyce Carol Oates' short story *Haunted* deals with murder, mystery and the supernatural when the protagonist's best friend, Mary Lou, is found dead. Set in a small, conservative farming town, Melissa and Mary Lou seem to live normal teenage lives. However, Melissa always had stronger feelings for Mary Lou than pure friendship. Her feelings were always kept hidden due to the religious values which governed her community. Despite the strict rules imposed upon them, the girls find an escape by visiting the old abandoned farms where they can be alone, free to think and act how they please. When Melissa decides to visit the abandoned Minton house alone, she encounters a ghost for the first time. The ghost punishes Melissa for trespassing onto the property in a sexual manner and tells her to send Mary Lou to her the next day. Melissa, though alarmed, is able to leave the Minton house alive.

Unfortunately, Mary Lou could not say the same after her visit to the farm. Mary Lou's ex-boyfriend, Hans, is immediately convicted for the murder, however he lacks a motive and has an alibi. Therefore, the real killer is never explicitly revealed. Oates uses the Minton house ghost in her short story to symbolize Melissa's recognition of her repressed sexuality, which can be seen through the characterization of the Minton house ghost, Melissa's relationship with Mary Lou and the strong religious values of their society.

The Minton house ghost is first introduced when Melissa visits the abandoned farm by herself. Initially, Melissa questions whether the figure is a man or a woman, but continuously refers to the ghost as she: " She was no age I could guess. Older than my mother but not old seeming. She wore men's clothes and she was tall as any man, with wide shoulders, and long legs, and big sagging breasts like cow's udders loose inside her shirt not harnessed in a

brassiere like other women's" (58). The ghost's eyes are described as being "small, and black, and set back deep in their sockets; the flesh around them looked bruised"(58). Melissa previously described her own eyes as being dark and deep-socketed, while the bruising around the ghost's eyes resembles the character of Mrs. Minton, who was beaten by her husband prior to her death. The way the ghost talks to Melissa also mirrors the authoritative, demeaning way that her fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Harding, would talk to her: "I will now administer punishment: take down your jeans. Take down your panties. Lie down on that mattress. Hurry." She spoke briskly now, she was all business" (59). The ghost encompasses different attributes from each of the female characters in Melissa's life. The different layers of characterization can be compared directly to the different layers of the ghost's face: "The skin of her face was in layers like an onion, like she'd been sunburnt, or had a skin disease. There were patches that had begun to peel" (59). The peeling of the different layers of the ghost's face can be used to represent how Melissa ultimately comes face to face with all of the female figures in her life who have kept her repressed for so long. The ghost is in fact brought to life through Melissa's own mind, and is not a physical entity.

Oates uses different styles of punctuation to demonstrate the creation of the ghost through Melissa's dissociation from reality. At first, the ghost speaks without quotation marks, as if she is not a real character within the text. As soon as Melissa lies down on the mattress as instructed by the ghost, she describes herself as having heavy eyelids and her head pounding with blood, showing how she is disconnecting from reality (57). She is not even capable of recognizing herself within her state of mind: "I saw my hand move out

slowly like a stranger's hand [...]” (57). After this event, the ghost's speech is seen in quotation marks, making her seem like a tangible character in the story. Melissa's experience with the ghost allows her to confront her repressed sexual thoughts and urges for the first time. The sexual manner in which the ghost punishes Melissa demonstrates the repressed sexual urges that Melissa has always internalized, finally being externalized. The violent nature of the acts symbolize the strong opposition to non-conforming views of sexuality from the female figures in Melissa's life, who are characterized through the ghost. While the abandoned Minton house was seen as the location for Melissa's self-recognition, it is also where her best friend Mary Lou is murdered.

Mary Lou and Melissa considered each other best friends, even sisters at times, but Melissa grew obsessive over Mary Lou as time passed on. Melissa considers Mary Lou as her sister because of their love/hate relationship: “Mary Lou was my sister I sometimes pretended, I told myself a story about us being sisters and looking alike, and Mary Lou said sometimes she'd like to leave her family her goddamned family and come live with me. Then the next day or the next hour she'd get moody and be nasty to me and get me crying,” (53). Their bond was so strong, that Melissa would withstand all of Mary Lou's fits and outbursts. However, Melissa was always jealous of Mary Lou because of her appearance and the attention she received for it, while Melissa always felt unnoticed (53). Nonetheless, Melissa is captivated by Mary Lou's beauty as well: “[...] Mary Lou caught my eye and winked and I sat there at my desk feeling the strangest sensation, something flowing into the top of my head, honey-rich and warm making its way down my spine”

(51). This demonstrates that Melissa's feelings towards Mary Lou are not solely platonic. Melissa cannot even deny being jealous of Mary Lou's boyfriend when Mary Lou confronts her, because her accusation is factual: "You're just jealous of Hans and me," Mary Lou said, unforgivably, and I hadn't any reply" (55). The author repeats the terms "sisters", "once upon a time" and "forbidden things" throughout the short story: "Once upon a time there were two little princesses, two sisters, who did forbidden things" (54). The motif of fairy tales is used to present her story as a cautionary tale, implying the severity of the forbidden things for which Melissa and Mary Lou take part in, with the "forbidden things" alluding to sexuality and sexual endeavors. The ghost is used as a tool for Melissa to confront her own repressed sexuality and decide how to move forward. She can either continue to be repressed, and live with the burden of hiding her true sexuality and feelings towards Mary Lou, or eliminate her desire altogether in an attempt to suppress her urges further. Melissa ultimately decides that she must kill the object of her desire, Mary Lou, in order to live a life abiding by her community's values.

The small, farming community where Melissa lives shaped her views of sexuality. Due to the religious and conservative beliefs of her society, she is forced to repress her sexual orientation in order to conform with those around her. As demonstrated through the way Melissa's mom speaks about Mary Lou's family, reputation is important to uphold in small towns: "The Siskins weren't a whole lot better than white trash, the way Mr. Siskin worked that land of his" (53). Since everyone knows everyone, it is important to conform in order to uphold your own status, but also the name of your

family. Religion also affected the values and morals of the community. Christianity was shown to be very important to Melissa's family as they have "[...] an old calendar tacked to a kitchen wall, [showing] a faded picture of Jesus Christ in a long white gown stained with scarlet, thorns fitted to His bowed head" (54). The image of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns can be seen as a metaphor for Melissa's struggle with her sexuality. One of the reasons why Jesus was crucified was because he welcomes outcasts, such as prostitutes and "half-breeds". His love towards people who were seen as unequal angered his enemies, and a crown of thorns was given to Him to signify his reign in a corrupt world (Tkach 2005 and DeYoung 2013). Melissa is also restrained from expressing her sexuality because she is not meant to love women in the eyes of her religious community. A crown of thorns is therefore placed upon her head as she suffers by suppressing her sexual desires. Her sexuality therefore causes her to feel disconnected from Christian values and morals as can be seen through her dialogue: "Damn [Mary Lou] to hell, I whispered under my breath" (54). After Mary Lou is found dead, Melissa's mother attempts to console her by saying that she was with Jesus Christ, but Melissa does not feel reassured: "[...] Mary Lou was in heaven now, Jesus Christ had taken her to live with Him and I knew that didn't I?" (61). Melissa is not comforted by the fact that Mary Lou would be in Heaven because she does not feel a strong connection to religion as someone who is considered sexually deviant. Her repressed sexual urges are forced to manifest themselves in a dangerous form: the Minton house ghost. She is able to confront her repressed emotions in the physical manifestation of the ghost who is the only one able to understand her "forbidden thoughts": "They don't know anything about you, do they?- what you do,

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and what you think? You and ' Mary Lou'" (59). Her encounter with the ghost allows her to explore the sexual desires that she was forced to keep repressed due to the strong religious values of her community. It is demonstrated how strongly Melissa felt oppressed in her environment as she was incapable of expressing these even many years later: " There were things you didn't talk about, back then. I never talked about them with my own children, there weren't the words to say them" (50). Thus the Minton house ghost is used as a tool to allow Melissa to recognize her repressed sexual urges, yet she continues to repress her desires after their encounter due to the pressure from her society.

The Minton house ghost can be seen as a symbol for Melissa confronting her repressed sexuality. Oates uses the characterization of the ghost, Melissa's friendship with Mary Lou and the traditional values of their farming community to express the monstrous consequences of repressed sexuality. The characterization of the Minton house ghost demonstrates how the female figures in Melissa's life have shaped her thoughts on sexuality and have forced her to repress it. The ghost is produced as an extension of Melissa after part of her is disassociated from her own body, and the sexual nature of the punishment demonstrates how oppressive her sexuality is deemed in her society. Melissa's friendship with Mary Lou throughout the short story was full of love, but also jealousy and anger. Mary Lou would treat Melissa badly, but Melissa would always remain loyal to her because of how much she loved Mary Lou. However her true feelings were always kept hidden until they were physically represented through the Minton house ghost, where Melissa could finally confront the emotions that she constantly

kept repressed. The religious and traditional values of the farming community in which the girls lived caused Melissa to repress her sexuality. She is only able to confront her repressed emotions when she is alone at the abandoned Minton farm away from all ties to her community. Although a killer was never revealed, it is alluded that Melissa's sexual repression becomes so strong that it eventually is released through killing the object of her desire, Mary Lou. By demonstrating that repressed emotions are capable of even murdering someone that you love, Oates therefore argues how monstrous the consequences are when one's sexuality and identity are suppressed.