

*“Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart” – A Tale of Bitter Truths*

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**“Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart” –  
A Tale of Bitter Truths**

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**Abstract**

*Joyce Carol Oates is one of the most creative and versatile contemporary writers in America. “Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart” is Joyce Carol Oates’ one of the finest novel. It is a novel filled with love, violence, class, racism, and a shared secret. The critics call this novel as a masterpiece. Oates takes the racial theme as the central subject in this novel. The bitter truths of the life are presented through different characters in this novel.*

*Oates novel, “Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart” critically represents the construction of white self and displays racism as a complex dialogue between social practices and individual. This paper examines how Oates’s novel represents effects of racism to a white female identity and aims to answer the questions about power, race and gender. It shows how the construction of the protagonist’s gendered and racial identity is represented as a complex and anxiety-ridden negotiation. The representation of the protagonist’s engagement with the white highlights both her desires and anxieties about the idea of race. In doing so, Oates’ novel presents how racism works both as defining and limiting to white female identity.*

**Keywords:** *Race, anxiety, racism and gender.*

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## **Introduction**

Joyce Carol Oates is an American novelist, poet, essayist and short story writer. She has been praised by both critics and readers. Oates is one of the most honored and respected contemporary American women authors. Joyce Carol Oates also wrote under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly. Oates has received a number of prestigious awards and prizes for her works. Oates's novel, "Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart" was nominated for best work of fiction in the 1990 National Book Awards.

Oates represents the dominant terrors of modern civilization, highlighting the excess of madness, fear and emptiness in her works. Oates is a unique creative genius, who blends reality and vision with great comprehension. Oates remarks: "In the novels I have written, I have tried to give shape to certain obsession of mid-century America's confusion of love and money, categories of public and private experience, of a demonic urge, I sense all around me, an urge to self annihilation, suicide- the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender." (Oates, Joyce Carol. 1970)

Since the beginning of the 1990s Joyce Carol Oates's fiction shows increasing interest in the issues of race and ethnicity. As Joanne Creighton eloquently puts it, in this novel, "Oates casts her portrayal of the self and 'the other' in a racial context" and enhances, "a potent new dimension to her study of American character and society." (Creighton, Joanne. 1992)

Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990) is a novel by Joyce Carol Oates. It is a saga of bitter truths. This novel discusses the impact of race and class on the formation of identity in America. Oates uses four families to illustrate this in the novel: the ambitious working-class Courtneys, the struggling black Fairchilds, the poor white Garlocks, and the upper-class Savages. All the individual characters are placed within the larger context of their families and social class.

'Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart' is the story of two young people who lives in Hammond, New York in the 1950's. As the novel begins, the dead body of a sixteen-year-old boy is found floating in the Cassadaga River. The boy's name is Patrick ("Little Red") Garlock. Little Red skull has been smashed. He is the son of a poor white unstable family that had moved to Hammond from West Virginia in the early 1940's. Little Red's mother, Vesta is mentally unbalanced and has been abused and abandoned by her husband, Vernon.

A large crowd watches the recovery of the body from the Cassadaga river. Iris Courtney is a thirteen-year-old girl standing in the crowd and looking at all this. Iris Courtney is the central consciousness of the novel. She is shy, ambitious and bright girl. Iris is seeking to overcome the obstacles presented to her by her social class and by her gambler father, Duke and her alcoholic mother, Persia.

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Marilyn Wesley neatly summarize; Oates's portrayals of troubled and dysfunctional family relationships address intricate issues of personal, familial, and public power in contemporary society. Her fiction looks at the problematic of an individual and family in different eras, giving a retrospective of the American family. (Wesley, Marilyn C. 1993)

In the novel, Oates uses flashback technique to tell the story of the events leading up to the death of Little Red Garlock. The night of Little Red's death, Iris Courtney walks and goes to Cheney's Variety Store, to buy a pack of cigarettes. The Cheney's Variety Store is only a few blocks away from her home and does not obey the law forbidding the sale of cigarettes to minors.

Jinx Fairchild is a fifteen-year-old boy who works at the store. Iris has a secret admiration for Jinx. Iris's attraction to Jinx is a secret, because she is a shy and innocent girl and also because she is white, and he is black. Jinx Fairchild is a star basketball player at Hammond Central High. Oates presents the world of sports in contemporary America, especially the way in which the sports world is a gateway to success for underprivileged male like Jinx.

As Iris walks back home through the dark streets she is harassed by Little Red, and so she runs back to Cheney's store for help where Jinx is closing the store. Little Red is a malevolent and insane juvenile delinquent. To protect Iris from Little Red, Jinx accompanies Iris on her way home. Little Red follows them, and screams indecent words at them. Jinx gets into a fight with him and they wrestle each other to the ground. Little Red picks up a block of concrete and attack it into Jinx's back, Jinx desperately grabs a rock and attack it into Little Red's head. Little Red dies and Jinx drag his body down the deserted street and throw it into the Cassadaga River.

The next day, when Little Red's body is discovered floating in the Cassadaga river, Iris mislead the police by giving them the wrong information. Iris tells the policeman that Little Red had been in trouble with a motorcycle gang, and that the gang had been looking for Little Red. Iris tries to protect Jinx, and the police never discover who killed Little Red.

After this incident, Jinx tries to avoid his sense of guilt by devoting his energy in playing basketball. He uses his talent as a basketball player to get rid of his memories of Little Red Garlock. When Jinx is on the court he never shows his feelings and so he is known as "Iceman". At the same time, his emotional self-control helps him to deal with the opposition which he has to tackle, due to racial prejudice in the town. Jinx Fairchild feels safe when he is playing basketball.

But the murder of Little Red has a serious effect on Jinx. Although Jinx is never caught by the police, the crime destroys his hopes and dreams. He cannot trust the white community of Hammond to give him a fair trial, because he

knows that as a black man he has no probability of innocence. Jinx begins to keep him away from the white world and feels alienated from the white world that once seemed to promise him great opportunities. His guilt feelings lead to a breakdown of his personality, and as a result he develops a troubled and self-destructive side. This leads to an “accident” on the basketball court that ruins his career as an athlete. In the state basketball tournament, Jinx falls and breaks his ankle. His injury was so severe that he will never be able to play basketball again and so his hopes for a college basketball scholarship are permanently damaged.

After the accident, Jinx quit school and basketball and give up the dream of a college scholarship that was to be his bridge to the successful white world. Iris later recognizes that Jinx’s injury is caused because of his sense of guilt about Little Red’s death and by his need to punish himself. Later in the novel readers understand that this accident is an unconscious self-punishment. Jinx’s injury is an act of self-punishment or expiation. Later Jinx drops school and takes a job in an automobile radiator company. He marries and works at a low-level job. Later in the novel Jinx is sent to Vietnam, where he will die, both self-defeated and defeated by the rigidities of the racist Hammond community.

Both Iris and Jinx are made to feel guilty and to feel a need for self-punishment because of Little Red’s death. Throughout the novel they feel the need to conceal their feelings from themselves and from others also. Subconsciously, they both have a need for redemption. This is enacted in the novel when Jinx falls and breaks his ankle.

Using her strength, intellect and a single-minded ruthlessness, Iris has moved up the economic and social ladder into success and well-being. The novel demonstrates the distance Iris has traveled from her origins. She is to marry Alan Savage, the patrician son of the cultivated, wealthy Savages, and she tries to forget her past, which she kept largely hidden from her new family. At the end of the novel, Iris models her bridal gown in front of the mirror and smirks, “Do you think I’ll look the part?” (Oates, BB, 1990, p.405)

These last lines in the novel tell us that Iris has constructed a persona that does not reflect her true self and that this duplicity has made her cynical and bitter.

In the novel both Jinx and Iris feel isolated and unfulfilled. They both have a longing in their hearts for a sense of personal identity. They have a desire to fit and to belong to a family or community. But they are denied of this sense of belonging, and thus are made to feel unwanted and unaccepted by society.

Jinx Fairchild and Iris Courtney are secretly connected by love and guilt. They have a lasting emotional attachment to each other, but this bond of love between them cannot be fulfilled. They find that this unfulfilled love for each other causes a

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feeling in their hearts of being empty. They realize that they have a need to belong to each other but this is not possible in the society.

Joyce Carol Oates is an artist of incomparable power of expression. Oates is concerned about America and its problems and she intelligently interprets the American loneliness in the multiple phases of their life, critically touching the American dream and its passion. Oates's main purpose is to show the impact of class and race in American society. The tragedy of Jinx Fairchild in the novel suggests that while the black man can use the narrow venue of sports as a way to achieve the American Dream but he is still largely oppressed. The class and race have also formed the character of Iris Courtney. Her increasingly sensual relationship with Jinx must be kept secret; in addition, the status of Jinx as a forbidden love seems to intensify her feelings. Iris cannot have a relationship with Jinx because it is not permitted due to the racism of her society.

One of Oates' fundamental desires is to criticize American society, its values and social injustices. She presents her objective from different angles. The central themes in Oates' fiction are connected to the critical examination of social conditions of American life. According to Brenda Daly, "Oates investigates particularly the distribution of power in various institutions and discourses within American society, and her aim to challenge the social hierarchies becomes evident especially in the transgressions of generic conventions". (Daly, Brenda 1996)

In the novel, Iris does not have the barriers of race to prevent her from rising in the world. Iris's success is a betrayal of her class and of herself. The ideal and perfect life of the Savages contrasts in an almost grotesque way with the novel's previous scenes of confusion and tragedy. For all their charm, the Savages preside over an America of injustice and inequality. Oates demonstrates Savages separation from the rest of America by making sure that the Savages do not appear until the final section of the novel. It is Iris who has the eyes to see that America is "two nations." Although she looks as if she is one of the elite but her roots are in the working-class town of Hammond, which is "other" America or different America. Yet the sense of liberation and security Iris enjoys has come at a cost, in which desire is renounced in exchange for social and economic security.

The character of Iris represents the theme of repression, sexuality and gender in contemporary American life. Oates suggests that the socialization of women in America requires the development of a sexual identity of either the "good girl" or the "bad girl." Iris must suppress her sexual feelings if she is to maintain her respectability in American society.

Iris is always taught not to use words that are abusive or vulgar. There are certain rules concerning white females of a certain class. The gendered rules

intersected by class and race, are highlighted in the conversation between Iris and her father, Duke.

“Jig” is one of the words Iris has been told she must not say ever. Like “nigger,” “coon,” “spade,” “spook,” “shine.” Yet when Duke uses the word everyone laughs, it’s so...unexpected. (Oates, BB, 1990, p.24)

When Duke, uses undesirable words, it is funny. So, the rules for men are less strict, and they seem to allow more space to transgress the implicit codes and rules of class and (white) race.

Oates’s vision of race, class and gender in America spread through violence. The injustice of class and race in Hammond inevitably lead to aggression and conflict. Oates depicts that America is a place where distinctions and exclusions based on class and gender and especially on race are rigidly enforced. Oates’s novel is filled with incidents of racial prejudice. In the novel, Persia says to her maid-

“Don’t stare, Iris. Haven’t I told you that’s rude?’ She wonders if their blood too, like their skin, is darker than the blood of Caucasians. Of ‘whites.’ She has heard the mysterious words ‘black blood,’ ‘Negro blood.’” (Oates, BB, 1990, p.21)

An important theme throughout the novel, ‘Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart’ is the racial tension between blacks and whites. During the 1950s and early ’60s in America, the feeling of unrest among black people was gathering momentum, which adds to the fear and hatred felt by many white people. As a young girl, Iris is warned by her family about associating with blacks. This is confusing to Iris, who does not fully understand the rules of existing social hierarchy based on the color line.

As Iris stares at the black people, she wonders why they are “different from us?” (Oates, BB, 1990, p.23). Her mother, Persia, prohibits her from staring at them, and as Iris asks her why, she answers: “They don’t know any better, some of them. But we do.” (Oates, BB, 1990, p.23) In her view, white people know how to behave and have civilized manners. Persia’s comment reveals a hierarchization between “we,” the white people and “they,” the black people.

Prejudices against race and class are very clear throughout the novel. For example, Jinx is not accepted into white society but his athletic skill has the potential to garner a scholarship and a better future in a white world.

Oates looks at the meaning of success and failure in American life with the help of Jinx and Iris characters. Jinx died a bitter man because he has been cheated out of the American Dream whereas Iris is bitter because her success is purchased at the price of her real identity. Whether a success or a failure, no character in the novel is not opposed and diminished by the social and psychological forces that shape American society. Finally, Joyce Carol Oates’ strategy is to depict identity struggles in relation to different classifications of identity in American society. Oates’

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novel functions as a narrative device in demonstrating how race, gender, class and its cultural boundaries are constantly negotiated.

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