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DOI: 10.15290/CR.2025.50.3.02

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*A Provision of Memories Stored up for Days to Come: A Ricœurian Reading of Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love**

Abstract. Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love* is a fictional memoir inspired by the infamous murder of Jon-Benét Ramsey. The novel explores the psychological impact of trauma and the complexities of memory as the protagonist, Skyler, grapples with the guilt of potentially being involved in his sister's death. Through a Ricœurian lens, this paper examines how memory serves both as a tool for understanding and as a means of obscuring the past. The analysis highlights the limitations of memory, its susceptibility to manipulation, and its role in shaping individual narratives. Ultimately, *My Sister, My Love* presents a poignant exploration of the human psyche, the enduring impact of trauma, and the quest for meaning in the face of tragedy.

Keywords: memory, trauma, Ramsey case, Joyce Carol Oates, Paul Ricœur

1. Introduction

One of the most famous cold cases in the recent history of America is the murder of JonBénét Ramsey, a six-year-old beauty queen who was found dead in the basement of her house in Boulder (Colorado) on December 26, 1996. Her body was wrapped in a blanket, tied, and showed evident skull traumas. Although the crime has been thoroughly investigated, there is still no one accountable for the murder of the girl. Her parents, John and Patsy Ramsey, were long suspected of having murdered their daughter. Another credited theory sees Burke, her elder brother (who was nine at the time), as his sister's murderer—he might have killed her in a bout of jealousy, forcing his parents to stage an abduction to protect him (Douglas and Olshaker 265).

After nearly three decades, America remains fixated on a murder where “the victim was so young, blond, and beautiful, the parents rich, prominent, and intelligent, the neighborhood fashionable and safe, the community secure and self-satisfied” (269). The image of the girl performing on stage, dressed and made-up as an adult, has become a symbol and icon not only

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of a shattered young life but also of the exploitation of children, their innocence, and beauty. In 2008, Joyce Carol Oates published the novel *My Sister, My Love*, inspired by the Ramsey case. This paper will analyze the novel as a literary “storage” of memories, considering it a parody of a memoir—a genre rooted in memory. It will also incorporate the theories of Paul Ricoeur from his seminal *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004).

2. Genesis, Structure, and Genre Classification of *My Sister, My Love*

Oates’s interest in the Ramsey case began about ten years before the publication of *My Sister, My Love*, when she reviewed some books on the subject for *The New York Review of Books*. A reflection of hers, regarding these publications and her general taste for true crime stories, anticipates, in fact, the choice of writing a novel about JonBenét Ramsey: “Perhaps, in the fact-obsessed late twentieth century, the most palatable fictions are those that aren’t really fictional but rather ‘facts’ audaciously reinvented in the language of gifted writers. For what is ‘reality’ except as it is presented through language?” (Oates, “Mystery” 31). Oates admitted to being inspired by the case for her novel, but she also stated in the introduction that *My Sister, My Love* “is a work of the imagination solely and lays no claim to representing actual persons, places or historical events” (Oates, *Sister* 3). The operation performed by the author is to change the facts, names, and places in the story only partially, while sharing her idea about the possible unraveling of the murder. The voice she uses is not that of the young victim (who bears the fateful name ‘Bliss’, with an obvious religious reference), nor her parents’, but her brother Skyler’s, who writes a memoir to tell his version of the story ten years after the murder. The names of the main characters keep a certain resemblance to the original ones: the victim’s last name, ‘Rampike’, sounds similar to ‘Ramsey’, and her mother’s name, ‘Betsy’, resembles ‘Patsy’. Oates also modifies the girl’s primary activity: she is a professional skater instead of a beauty pageant queen. The places and dates are slightly changed; the murder occurs on the night between January 28 and 29, 1997 (not between December 25 and 26, 1996). The setting is not Boulder but the suburb of Fair Hills, New Jersey. Skyler’s memoir, written for the tenth anniversary of his sister’s death, reveals its purpose from the very first page. The narrator describes it as “a ‘unique personal document’—not a mere memoir but (maybe) a confession” (4). Repeating the events from ten years earlier aims to recount Bliss Rampike’s life, remember her, and try to understand what truly happened the night she died.

At the beginning of the memoir, neither the reader nor the narrator knows who did it or why. Only toward the end will the narration and the case be resolved; to do this, the narrator must relive the entire story, remember it, and forgive the author of the crime. The novel is a fictional memoir that reproduces all the typical elements of the genre. This does not make it less complex, especially considering the tragedy that inspired it. The horror caused by JonBénét Ramsey’s murder requires creating a narration that tells her story as a victim, since memory is, as Paul Ricoeur states, “the ultimate ethical motivation for the history of victims” (*Time* 187). The account

also seeks to understand the reasons behind certain events that seem senseless and cruel, and only fiction “gives eyes to the horrified narrator” (188). Rather than writing a traditional novel about the case, Oates chose to produce a parody of a memoir.

A memoir is defined as “a factual account of the author’s life” (Yagoda 1), and it differs from an autobiography because it does not recount a whole life, but only a part of it related to some specific event (1). Autobiographies focus on the author, while memoirs turn him into a character, “essentially negative, or at least neutral” (2). The narrator in *My Sister, My Love* adheres to these rules. Of his nineteen years, he recounts only those he spent with his murdered sister and those following her death. Many chapters are narrated in the third person, as if the author wanted to be equated with a character. Skyler is obsessed with the idea that he could be, although he does not remember it, the person who killed his sister out of envy. Since the girl had started her career as a skater, Skyler had been neglected by his parents, also because of a physical defect (a chronic limp) he had acquired after an accident at the gym. The trauma of Bliss’s death and the fear of being the one who caused it add up to a set of mental disorders that make him a difficult teenager, always in therapy and forced to attend special schools.

Skyler is not a positive character, as he seems to have little to speak for himself; perhaps for this reason, he might make the perfect author of a memoir. Before the 1960s, when the genre gained popularity in America (Yagoda 214), such books were written by “eminences, the pious, and people with exciting, unusual, or somehow stirring stories” (67). From the 1990s onward, memoirs often focused on stories of “dysfunction, abuse, poverty, addiction, mental illness and/or bodily ruin” and seemed to favor “the more unsettling, shocking, or horrifying the truth, it sometimes seemed, the better” (228). The story in this novel contains all these elements, except for poverty, as the Rampikes are a typical upper-middle-class family living in a wealthy suburb. The dysfunction relates to family dynamics within the Rampike household; the abuse is what Betsey Rampike inflicts on her daughter through exhausting training, medical visits with prescribed drugs, and especially when she forces her to dress and make up like an adult, even after she kills her childhood innocence; the dependency is Skyler’s, who had been sedated since the morning they found Bliss’s corpse in the basement, and for many years afterward until he entered a clinic for rehab and quit drugs; the mental illness is connected to the multiple diagnoses Skyler receives from different psychiatrists, some of whom report that he’s at high risk of suicide; the bodily ruin refers to the boy’s need to hide his limp and to cope with the unsettling zinc-colored hair after he became bald following his sister’s death (Oates, *Sister* 20).

The fake memoir written by Oates retrieves many typical themes of the genre. Moreover, it can be associated with what Yagoda defines as “therapeutic culture”, a general tendency where “it’s not only acceptable but a good thing to lie on a couch in public, as it were, and disgorge personal stories” (238). Even though *My Sister, My Love* is filled with scenes involving a psychiatrist, paradoxically, it is not one of them who prompts Skyler to write a memoir as a cathartic act. It is a pastor, Bob, who exhorts the boy to tell his story: “Pastor Bob said: You must unburden your soul, son. You must tell your story. Told Pastor Bob hell I’m dyslexic. Or something”

(Oates, *Sister* 27). The man whom Skyler meets during his rehab eventually becomes the only reliable figure for the boy and the only positive character in the novel. In this brief dialogue, it is possible to notice how initially Pastor Bob is far from being the only trustworthy figure for the narrator. The dialogue is built on the contrast and the distance between Skyler and the pastor. The language used by Bob is solemn, and it displays explicit religious references, which later define him as “a religious lunatic” (28). Skyler’s answer, instead, contains an ironic element. He counterposes to the ethereal language of the religious man a much more concrete problem: his dyslexia. This is one of the elements that make *My Sister, My Love* a parody of a memoir. Even if it deals with serious subjects, it provides what Mikhail Bakhtin defines as the essential element of parody and satire: the comic double (58). The ironic element of the story does not regard the murder itself, which remains a tragic event, but everything that revolves around the Rampike family, and most of all, Skyler’s parents. Bix, the father, and Betsey, the mother, are the real parodic elements in the novel: rich and ignorant, always seeking social validation by any means, including the exploitation of their children and the tragedy they are responsible for.

The target of Oates’s satirical hatred is Betsey, an extremized version of Patsy Ramsey. The satire does not have ethical boundaries, since the author comments with irony even about the woman’s death, an event that occupies the final part of the memoir and determines the solution of the mystery related to Bliss’s death. The satirical element is the downgrading of the woman’s cause of death: not an incurable disease, but the consequences of liposuction. Here, it is possible to notice the same strategy applied previously: degrading even the most solemn situations with low elements, such as Skyler’s dyslexia or cosmetic surgery. Betsey decides to undergo liposuction because, after the death of Bliss, she becomes a public figure, which had always been her greatest aspiration. Unlike what happened in reality, Betsey starts appearing on several TV programs, she takes up writing memoirs on how to overcome grief through faith, and she founds a brand, “Heaven Scent,” which produces gadgets, makeup for girls, and various objects inspired by Bliss, including a doll with her features. Betsey’s TV performances follow the memoir logic. As claimed by Yagoda, “in the publishing environment of the time [the 90’s], promotion was seen as the key to commercial success; the key to promotion was getting on talk shows; and the best way to get on a talk show was with a dramatic or unusual personal story” (238).

What characterizes this memoir even more is the voice of the author: a teenager. It is a voice that shapes the memoir because, among the genres produced by young adults, biography and autobiography are the most significant ones, and through them, they can express their frustrations and desires (Alexander and McMaster 154). What generally compels teenagers to write is “the urgent need for knowledge in the face of knowledge denied” (52). Skyler tells his story for this reason: he does not know whether he killed his sister or not. The event, as he remembers it, is filled with voids that do not allow him to reconstruct it following his memories, but only starting from what he has been told or what he has read in the tabloids. It is a knowledge denied until the end of the novel, when a letter written by Betsey before her death allows him to acquire it, but not before he has reconstructed the story several times.

Youth writing has distinct structural characteristics. Among these is the tendency to use the visual element, which turns out to be “the best and often only source of knowledge” (53). Skyler’s memoir displays this inclination not only in the abundance of graphic details (he describes meticulously the costumes worn by Bliss during her competitions), but also in the frustration of someone who cannot provide a visual form of what he writes: “KNOW WHAT I WISH? THAT MY SISTER, MY LOVE: THE INTIMATE STORY OF Skyler Rampike wasn’t a (linear) document agonizingly comprised of words, but a film, or a film-collage, or a ‘video installation’ so that at this point I could unleash a torrent of images, film clips, TV footage to speed up the (gut-twisting) narrative” (Oates, *Sister* 231, emphasis in the original). The fragment shows how the narrator does not rely on mere narrative techniques, and he realizes that writing is an ineffective tool to tell his story as he visualizes it. Words are not enough, while a video montage could give the right pace to the events he recounts. Moreover, he defines what he writes as a “linear” document, with a clear lack of awareness of how nonlinear the document actually is, given that it contains continuous time shifts. Another element displayed by youth writing is the appropriation of the voices of the characters, “so beginning a gradual fragmentation of narrative authority” (Alexander and McMaster 165).

The narrating voice never changes, the point of view shifts between the nine-year-old Skyler and his nineteen-year-old counterpart, but the narrator absorbs the voices and reports them, sometimes, with the same confusion of his first perception of them, constructing entire paragraphs without comments that narrate certain episodes on his behalf. For instance, in the paragraph “Cripple?”, which describes the moment he had been victim, as a child, of the gym accident that crippled him forever: “JESUS KID I’M SORRY Skyler darling? This is Mummy Mummy loves you so Swear to you, son never meant push you son Pray for you darling both of us Mummy and God-damn very best orthopetric pediatic Good as new, darling! Mummy and Daddy promise” (Oates, *Sister* 84). The piece sees the shifting of Bix and Betsey’s voices, and it reproduces the dizziness of the kid who can only grasp fragments of their conversations. Bix’s voice, which appears first, apologizes for forcing the child to be trained to become an athlete, even though he had been told clearly that he was too young. So, he tries to overcome his sense of guilt promising him that they will find the best orthopedic doctor. The sentence that contains the promise, an elliptic one since it lacks the verb, is constructed to be a typical sentence of Bix’s. His language is always abundant in superlatives (“god-damn very best”) and malapropisms (“orthopetric” instead of “orthopedic” and “pediatic” instead of “pediatric”). Betsey’s language possesses its typical features as well: the woman refers to herself in the third person (“this is Mummy Mummy loves you so”) and the always present religious afflatus (“Pray for you darling”) that make her believe that everything can be sorted out, or obtained, through prayer. In this piece it is possible to retrace the third feature of youth writing: the obfuscation as a literary strategy, a “narrative game” that is accomplished deliberately to confound the reader (Alexander and McMaster 159).

Oates chose the memoir to write about the Ramsey case due to some distinctive features of the genre. First, it is a genre that deals with memory, so it allowed her not only to give a very

specific voice to the one who remembers the events, but also to exploit the proverbial fallibility of memory to give life to a narration that is characterized by confusion and stratification. Memory is unreliable, since “consciously or unconsciously, we manipulate our memories to include or omit certain aspects” (Shields 57), a manipulation accomplished also by the narrator of *My Sister, My Love* as he admits that: “you, who are Skyler’s readers, can know only what Skyler chooses to tell you. Though presumably I am the “author”—I, too, know only what Skyler can tell me” (Oates, *Sister* 501). In this fragment, Skyler discusses himself in the third person, revealing his unreliability as a narrator by claiming that he is deliberately choosing what to tell his readers. At the same time, he must rely on what the kid Skyler—and his memory—decide to tell him. It is a memory made even more unreliable by the years spent under the influence of drugs. Memories, moreover, “have a quasi-narrative structure, constituting a story or scene in a story, an inbuilt successiveness strong enough to keep the narrative the same on each act of remembering but not strong enough to ensure that the ordering of events is the ordering that originally took place” (Shields 57).

The scenes are built meticulously by Skyler, who reconstructs his memories and gives them a precise architecture that sometimes he must struggle to keep intact, revealing its artificial nature. It happens in the paragraph “In the beginning”, where Skyler reflects upon a conversation he had had with his mother when he was four years old, and she had poured out about her marital frustrations. Skyler reports a great deal of their dialogue, and then observes: “Damn: I’ve forgotten to ‘set the scene’” (Oates, *Sister* 34). The comment, which is a metatextual note, reveals how the construction of the scenes is totally artificial and how memories can be manipulated and rearranged. For this reason, the memoir genre is not considered anymore as a reliable and objective account, but a genre “universally understood to offer subjective, impressionistic testimony. It doesn’t pretend to offer *the* truth, just the *author’s* truth” (Yagoda 265).

The manipulation of memory underlies George Lipsitz’s notion of “counter-memory”: a way to remember or to forget that is local, immediate, and personal (213). Counter-memory looks at the past to accomplish a revision of the existing stories, “supplying new perspectives about the past” (213). Skyler’s perspective can be considered a counter-memory, a new version of the stories published in the tabloids or the version that he had been told by his parents. Counter-memory, indeed, is not a rejection of history, “but a reconstruction of it” (277), which is in fact what Skyler does throughout his memoir, hoping to understand whether he is his sister’s murderer or not.

The fundamental element of Lipsitz’s notion is that counter-memory seeks for hidden stories, those that were excluded from the dominating narratives (214). Skyler is naturally the neglected person in his family: obscured by the beauty and the fame of Bliss, he is always excluded by his parents. Before the murder, he listens to his father confessing that he cannot leave his wife, even if he would like to, because she is obsessed with “[their] daughter” (Oates, *Sister* 279). In the two pages that follow, Skyler writes only the titles of two paragraphs left completely blank. The title of the first is “...NOT A WORD OF OUR SON”. The asterisk leads to a footnote: “*Moment at which nine-year old Skyler Rampike realized irrevocably that in the lives of his parents whom

he loved so desperately as in the vast world beyond the Rampike household Skyler Rampike was, at the most, but a footnote” (Oates, *Sister* 280). In this textual metaphor, Skyler compares himself to a footnote, hence to a lesser element with respect to the main text (which is the dominating narrative mentioned by Lipsitz). In the following page, where there is only a title (“FOOTNOTE!*”), Skyler uses another note to explain his metaphor better:

*In a text that more accurately reflects its subject, the remainder of this narrative would consist exclusively of footnotes. For it’s down here, IN FOOTNOTES, that Skyler Rampike actually lived. (And what about you, the skeptical reader? Is it painful to realize that you, too, are but a footnote in others’ lives, when you had wished to imagine you were the text?). (281)

This time, the narrator addresses the readers, suggesting they might be “footnotes” for somebody as well.

Another reason to choose the memoir as a genre is that it allows the author, and the chosen narrator, to actively control the time of the story, accomplishing a resignification of the past in the present (Kancyper 41). Moreover, even if this is a text written for therapeutic purposes, it detaches completely from psychotherapy, which the narrator finds useless after his many experiences following the death of his sister who, like the narrator, was a person without the right to make decisions about her own life, and who never had the chance to speak her mind on the exploitation of her talent. Every time she tried to express a desire or an opinion, she was promptly silenced by her mother. Death prevented her from ever telling her story, a task taken on by her brother, who has the unique privilege of being alive and able to remember and recount a past that is incessantly reconstructed according to his needs (Gantheret 19). Skyler recognizes this incessant need when, at the beginning of his memoir, he admits to his “helpless need to repeat, re-view, and re-vise certain episodes from my past/my sister’s past *ad nauseam*” (Oates, *Sister* 6). Resignification, indeed, is based more on rewriting the past than remembering it (Kancyper 43). An example is offered by a childhood incident, when he had found a used condom on the floor of his father’s car. For the child, it was a meaningless object, but when he writes of that discovery at nineteen, the narrator puts in a footnote his resignification of an apparently marginal event:

*What the hell is this? A used condom? A condom? In Daddy’s new Jeep Crusher? That bastard! That deceitful son of a bitch! Only now it dawns on me, Daddy must’ve been screwing one of his girl assistants, or, who knows, some hooker he’d picked up somewhere. Skyler, poor dumb kid, wouldn’t have had a glimmering of a clue what any of this meant for all Skyler knew of “sex” was that is involved doing desperate things to ‘keep your hubby from wandering.’ (Oates, *Sister* 72)

The footnote begins with exclamations and insults directed at his father that show how the resignification of the past produces its effects in the present, as if Bix’s car contained his nineteen-year-old son and not the “poor dumb kid” who ignored what was sex.

A person does not resignify the past in general, but only certain moments that constitute a chaotic set of traumatic scenes partly removed and never signified in the course of the years (Kancyper 41–42). That is why the night of the murder is reconstructed several times. These reconstructions are manifestations of a mysterious, repetitive, and incomprehensible past that only towards the end of the novel becomes a clearer reality, so that the subject can rewrite his story and be open to the future (43). The resignification of Bliss's death is obtained through the letter that Betsey writes to Skyler before she dies. The woman reveals that she had murdered the girl accidentally while staging a fake abduction to convince Bix to come back home after he had left the family. She had then blamed her son in front of her husband, and together they had decided to protect him by producing a fake ransom note. The revelation rewrites the story, and the past gets finally clearer: "NOT GUILTY! ... Thinking *I was not the one. I was not* astonished and stunned as if he'd been struck a blow over the head with a mallet, yet smiling to indicate he was not injured, he was in fact very happy. ... *Not me! Never me* smiling, shaking his head as he drove, his night vision blotched by tears" (Oates, *Sister* 543, emphasis in the original). Being cleared from the 'guilt' allows the protagonist to reconstruct a past that had been obscure for years, but also to be open to the future and to forgive his parents, not for what they had done to Bliss—"only Bliss can forgive you for her," writes Skyler at the end of the novel—but for what they had done to him (561).

3. From Memory to Forgiving: A Ricœurian Reading of *My Sister, My Love*

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur deals with the themes of memory and forgetting, outlining their main features and the path that leads from memory to forgiving through the analysis of other sub-themes such as death, grief, and guilt. It is a path that can be ascribed also to the protagonist of *My Sister, My Love*, who, writing his memoir, goes through all the stages mentioned in the French philosopher's work.

For Ricœur, memory is the main feature of memoirs. He claims that the writing of "a diary, memoirs or anti-memoirs, autobiographies" is helpful to provide "materiality to the traces preserved" (*Memory* 28–29). In this way, "provisions of memories are stored up for days to come" (29). The protagonist of Oates's novel creates his 'storage' of memories describing private family facts, and never the history of his time and place, hence the level of this memoir is that of microhistory (244–45), since the relationships recounted are only those of Skyler with his family, the people of Fair Hills, his schoolmates and those he meets at the rehab center. What the narrator establishes from the beginning is a contract with his readers, where they accept that the document presented "will deal with situations, events, connections and characters who once really existed" (275). Skyler addresses his readers directly when he declares: "For I intend to approach this subject from the inside purely, as one who lived through it. Trust me! I swear, I will tell only the truth *as I have lived it*" (Oates, *Sister* 13). The narrator states that he will provide an authentic and truthful document on the events he lived. The exhortation to trust

him is addressed to the readers, to whom he swears, as if he were in front of a court, that he will only write the truth.

The first stage of Skyler's path is memory: a necessary duty, as Ricoeur would call it. It is the duty of extracting "the exemplary value from traumatic memories" because "it is justice that turns memory into a project; and it is this same project of justice that gives the form of the future and of the imperative to the duty of memory" (*Memory* 87). Justice, for himself and his dead sister, leads Skyler into writing the memoir, which is conceived as his duty as a survivor: "Skyler has no choice, Skyler has to live. One day, Skyler has to reveal all he knows of his sister Bliss's life/death. It his Skyler Rampike's responsibility" (Oates, *Sister* 26–27). The responsibility that the narrator perceives as his own compels him to dig into his childhood memories. The evocation of a memory has certain features that Ricoeur emphasizes. First, the visual nature of memories, since "the presence in which the representation of the past seems to consist does indeed appear to be that of an image" (*Memory* 5). One of the first memories retrieved by Skyler is represented as an image, the official family picture of Christmas of 1996, the last one with Bliss alive, the favorite of the press:

You could hardly avoid seeing photographs of the little girl with her family, particularly the media favorite taken just before Christmas 1996 of the Rampikes seated before the ten foot extravagantly decorated fir tree in the living room of their Fair Hills, New Jersey, "part-restored" Colonial: broad-shouldered good-looking Bruce "Bix" Rampike, who is Bliss's daddy; strikingly dressed, eagerly smiling Betsey Rampike, who is Bliss's mummy; little Bliss in a crimson velvet frock trimmed in white (ermine) fur, with the glittery Jersey Ice Princess tiara on her small head, white eyelet stockings and shiny black patent-leather ballerina flats and that famous sweet-shy-angel smile, between Daddy and Mummy and each is clasping Bliss firmly in the crook of an arm; and, at the edge of the family portrait, in a vulnerable position to be handily cropped from the photo, the older, talentless brother Skyler. (Oates, *Sister* 6)

The choice of the image is particularly suitable because it immediately provides a portrait of the Rampikes, how they look, and their inner dynamics. The portrayal of the Christmas tree and the house gives them the status of high-middle-class people. The members of the family are described in terms of their most evident physical features, and in the case of Bliss, even in their attire. Only Skyler is in a marginal position compared to the other three, signaling immediately his nature of 'footnote' within the family: a figure that can be easily cropped out of the picture. Another feature of this first image is the fact that Skyler can rely on its popularity and on a memory shared with his readers. The narrator takes for granted that everybody knows the picture, which is part of a collective memory, a trace "left by the events that have affected the course of history of the groups concerned" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 95). According to Ricoeur, collective memory is an essential counterpart of the individual one, and it is thanks to it and "through the instruction received from others, that individual memory takes possession of

itself" (120). Nonetheless, this text is focused on the individual memory and its perils, for instance, the constant risk of confounding memory and imagination, which "affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory" (7). In Oates's novel, this possibility becomes real through the help requests of Bliss that her brother keeps hearing constantly for ten years: "*SKYLER HELP ME SKYLER I AM SO LONELY IN THIS PLACE SKYLER I AM so afraid I hurt so Skyler you won't leave me in this terrible place will you Skyler?*" (Oates, *Sister* 3). Skyler hears them especially at night, and they make him believe that he might be his sister's murderer. But the ending shows that he had imagined everything: because these are the sentences that Bliss might have uttered if she had been taken to the basement ("this terrible place") by her brother, tied and hit on the head ("I hurt so") and left there alone to die ("I am so lonely in this place"). This is proof of the unreliability of memory, which is "our one and only resource for signifying the past character of what we declare we remember" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 21). For this reason, Skyler's account is fragmented, and his life is miserable, because for ten years he has not been able to remember the events of that night and he has been tormented by the idea of being responsible for Bliss's death. The voice that he hears is just one of the forms taken by the resurrection of the past: hallucinations (84). It is a feature that constitutes a weakness, "a loss of reliability for memory" (84).

Another feature of memory is that it "does not only bear on time: it also requires time" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 74). The fact that it took Skyler ten years to recompose the puzzle of Bliss's mysterious death confirms the veracity of Ricoeur's claim. Ten years that, without memory, have been stolen from Skyler: "A heavy booted foot on the nape of his neck for the fact was *Ten years of my life taken from me, and my sister taken from me*" (Oates, *Sister* 545, emphasis in the original). Before he comes to the revelation that allows him to reconstruct the succession of events, he must rely on memory, which is "fundamentally a critical memory" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 79). The function of the footnotes, which are abundant in the text, is to reflect on the memories recounted. One of those regards a New Year's Eve of many years before, which the narrator does not remember well. He reflects on it in a footnote:

*Poor dumb kid! He'd have been dazed/dazzled by Mummy's perfume and Mummy's creamy breasts in danger of spilling out of the tight peach-chiffon bodice. And maybe there was Daddy, or a tall hulking Terminator-figure in a "tux", looming in the doorway behind Mummy. By my calculation the new year Mummy promised had to be 1992. Fact: it wouldn't be much different from the old. (Oates, *Sister* 54)*

Skyler comments on his stupidity and the almost incestuous way he had of looking at his mother. Reflecting on that memory, he concludes that it was 1992, a year not that different from the others. All his efforts to remember, and the critical asset that Skyler gives to memory, have two main functions. The first is to provide a "present representation of an absent past" (Ricoeur, *Memory* 364). Memories, in the way they are rearranged, are something that stands for something else, a concept that Ricoeur defines as "the reconstructions of what actually took place 'as though

actually having been” (363). The “present image of an absent thing” (280) is not only that of Bliss, represented through pictures that are known to the readers, but also that of the Rampikes when they were still a family. The second function is connected to the first, as giving oneself an identity through the representation of the past in the present, because memory is one of the elements that provides people with an identity (80). Given the proximity of memory and imagination, this latter represents, in the quest for one’s identity, “its spur and its helper” (80). For Skyler, imagining (or remembering) the voice of his sister that begs him to leave her not “in [that] terrible place” is both an aid to memory and, being a product of his imagination, something that confounds him even more about his identity. The problem has only one solution: confrontation with others (Ricoeur, *Memory* 81). Confronting one another, in the case of Skyler, initially causes confusion. His parents let him think that he is responsible for his sister’s murder without saying openly that he is. Only by confronting his mother *in absentia* can Skyler be sure that he did not kill Bliss.

The entire process of remembering is made difficult by forgetting, “the problematic of memory and faithfulness to the past” (Ricoeur, *Memory* 412). Hence, memory becomes “a struggle against forgetting” (413). Ricoeur differentiates two types of forgetting: one obtained by erasing the traces of a memory, and the other that he defines *oubli de réserve*: memories that have not been erased definitively but only made inaccessible (414–16). That is the case of the memories regarding the night of Bliss’s death. Skyler reconstructs them more than once, and as he goes further with the writing of his memoir, they take on more details that were apparently removed and become accessible again. That is a phenomenon that he cannot explain and which he analyzes in a footnote of the second reconstruction of that night: “*This painful account of Skyler’s recollection of the night of his sister’s death differs in small but (possibly?) significant ways from the account in Part I. How to explain this? I’m stumped” (Oates, *Sister* 306). It is a condition that Skyler is not aware of, and which he cannot explain, so that he remains “stumped.” But the apparently inaccessible storage of memories allows Ricoeur to claim that “one forgets less than one thinks or fears” (Ricoeur, *Memory* 416). The philosopher states that forgetting is caused by obstacles that block the access “to the treasures buried in memory” (444). For Skyler, these obstacles are certainly the drugs he has taken for years. The boy suspects that someone has given them to him even on the night of the murder

but Skyler will not help because Skyler is sleeping in his bed in his room oblivious of his sister’s struggle so deep/dreamless/leaden a sleep you would think (possibly) the nine-year-old had been drugged for his frightened mother will have a difficult time waking him hours later and now it has been nine years, ten months, and twenty days and still the accursed child has not fully awakened.
(Oates, *Sister* 14)

The piece, where Skyler sketches the first and brief reconstruction of the night of the murder, recreates the confusion of that impenetrable sleep through the limited use of punctuation and the repetition of his name. Moreover, Skyler describes the nature of his sleep as “deep/dreamless/

leaden,” which is typical in people under the effect of benzodiazepines (Marks and Pare 48). The boy considers the possibility that he might have been sedated, and that sensation of not being fully awake yet after ten years depends perhaps on the prolonged assumption of such drugs.

At the core of the memoir there is another sub-theme treated by Ricœur: death. The philosopher recognizes two types of death, “violent” death (such as murder), which regards the sphere of public existence, and the death of our dearest ones (*Memory* 360). This latter is defined as “an ‘easy’ death, even if it is disfigured by the horror of agony” (360). In Oates’s novel, the two types of death are virtually indistinguishable. Bliss’s murder regards both the public and the private sphere, so Skyler must undergo a double meditation on it. Death, according to Ricœur, characterizes the one who is absent in History, and the act of writing about him/her is the equivalent “of the social ritual of entombment, of the act of sepulcher” (365). The symbolic entombment of Bliss takes place at the end of the novel, when all the secrets are unveiled, and her brother destroys the evidence of Betsey’s guilt (the letter from his mother and the video she had shot to convince Skyler that he was responsible for his sister’s death), setting them on fire. The boy defines this act as “the most beautifully ‘symbolic’ gesture of his young life” (Oates, *Sister* 560), but only a few lines later, he realizes that the real entombment of Bliss had taken place in the moment he had stopped hearing her imploring voice (561).

Death is also connected to the themes of depression and mourning. Ricœur, drawing from Sigmund Freud’s theories, distinguishes between mourning, where the universe appears impoverished and empty in the absence of the loved object, and melancholia, where the self is in a condition of desolation and devaluation (*Memory* 72–73). The reproaches of the self towards itself are nothing more than reproaches towards the loved object (73). The ambivalence of the feeling towards the lost loved object is very strong in this phase, where love and hate are contiguous, even in the grief of loss (73). In the memoir, the ambivalence of Skyler’s feelings towards his sister is evident. He displays jealousy and envy throughout the novel because she is more beautiful, more talented, and loved than he is. Moreover, she is the cause of Skyler’s devaluation to a ‘footnote’ (Oates, *Sister* 280). The boy’s resentment reaches its climax when Bix decides to leave the family. Betsey tries to convince her children that he might have taken this decision due to Bliss’s defeat at a skating competition, and another she had canceled because of a “phantom pain” in her leg (200). Skyler feels he can make his sister feel even more guilty by telling her: “[y]our fault, Daddy isn’t here! Damn you” (201). Later, watching the girl crying, he apologizes to her, but realizing that she is the protagonist even in such a sad moment, he concludes, “[d]amn you, Bliss! Everything in this damn house has to do with you” (203).

Another episode that reveals the ambivalence of Skyler’s feelings occurs when he is given a badge with the acronym “H.I.P.” (High Ivy Potential) at school. Bliss notices the badge and asks her brother if it is for her, to which he replies, “No! For once, it’s something for me” (Oates, *Sister* 284). The dialogue between the siblings shows how Skyler is happy to display, for once, the recognition of a talent. The way he makes fun of her is the symptom of a constant resentment towards a girl who, as he admits eventually, adores him.

This continuous alternation of feelings, which is typical of depression after the death of the loved object, is, according to Ricoeur, something that becomes “insanity, madness” (*Memory* 75); it is what happens to Skyler, who needs therapy for years, but rarely understands what his real problem is. Only in the end do readers learn that the boy only needed to let his sister go. Ricoeur claims that grief and depression are typical in a mourning that has not taken its course yet (77). Once this phase has been completed, it is possible to let the lost object go and reconcile with him/her. It is no coincidence that, once the narrative path is completed, Skyler can solve the ambivalence of his feelings for Bliss: “How could his father have believed, these long years of Skyler’s exile, ten long years banished from the family, that he, Skyler, was a murderer! Of his own sister he’d loved, a murderer!” (Oates, *Sister* 544). In this piece, Skyler reveals for the first time what he felt for his sister. The physiological envies between the siblings, continuously evoked during the depression, can now fade to leave room for the primary feeling of love. Along with the definition of his feelings for Bliss, there comes the final phase: forgiving. Ricoeur defines forgiving as a “reconciliation with the past” (*Memory* 412), “where there has been an indictment, a finding of guilt, and sentencing” (453). It was impossible, thus, that Skyler could forgive someone before his mother’s letter.

Ricoeur also states that forgiving follows a trajectory similar to an ordeal, usually an institutional one, which leads to the public accusation of the guilty and, hence, to justice. Paradoxically, forgiveness can only occur through gestures that are not institutional and which are far from the idea of “justice is done” (*Memory* 457). In the novel, there is no punishment for Betsey because she dies before Skyler can report what she did, so she dies an innocent woman, at least before the law. Consequently, the forgiveness of her son goes beyond the condemnation of a Court: he forgives her for making him guilty of a crime he had never committed. He also forgives her for ruining ten years of his life through a deception and his exile from the family. That of Betsey is a moral responsibility that is far from “the structure of the trial” and which is more similar to the center of guilt, the bad will” (476). Her bad will lies in voluntarily accusing her son in front of her husband. Skyler’s forgiving regards all these elements, but not Bliss’s death: “Fuck you I ‘forgive’ you. Both of you: ‘Mummy’—‘Daddy’. But not for Bliss, I don’t forgive you for Bliss, only Bliss can forgive you for her. For Bliss, you can both rot in hell” (Oates, *Sister* 561). The forgiving formula appears as a performative act (Austin 5); the boy writes it as an empty and formal expression that has only an executive value. The second part stresses how he cannot forgive his parents for Bliss’s death because only Bliss can forgive them for it. According to Ricoeur, indeed, the victim is the only person who has the faculty of forgiving (*Memory* 479).

4. Conclusions

The analysis of *My Sister, My Love* reveals that this novel cannot be considered solely a manipulation of the Ramsey case. The choice of genre—the memoir—makes memory the focal point of the entire narrative, which is viewed as a virtual archive where some files (memories) are more accessible (or sometimes less) than others. The memoir allows its fictive author to reflect on

the nature of this archive and to finally find the memories he needed to symbolically bury his sister and forgive the people who are responsible for her death. The long path described in this novel, the struggle to acquire a “knowledge denied,” is not only a way for Oates to provide her opinion on the Ramsey case, but most of all to use the virtual archive of memories with a higher aim: giving a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves anymore.

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