

Norma Jeane (De)Constructs Marilyn Monroe:

Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*¹

Bilge Mutluay

Raymond Federman, the contemporary American writer who fictionalizes parts of his life experiences, was once challenged by one of his readers to prove that a certain event really happened to him. In retrospect, he comments on the connections between narrating an experience faithfully and creating stories from the memory of that experience:

[...] fiction and autobiography are always interchangeable, just as life and fiction, fact and fiction, language and fiction, that is to say history and story are interchangeable. And this is because [...] the STORY always comes first. Or to put it slightly different: everything is fiction, because everything always begins in language, everything is language. The great silence within us must be decoded into words in order to be and to mean. (Federman 42)

Readers may be curious about life stories or seriously interested in the experiences of others or simply seek to know more about the scandalous affairs of celebrities. Whatever their reasons for reading biographies are, stories about one's life raise questions on the factuality of the text. Biographers may claim that they have represented their subjects faithfully, yet, as Federman puts it, naturally "a great deal of suspicion may arise as to the reliability of its facts" (40).

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of the paper presented at the 27th Annual American Studies Seminar, Myths and Legends in America: America in Myths and Legends, November 6-9, 2002 in Çeşme, İzmir. The original presentation included a multi-media show with several Marilyn Monroe images and the birthday song to President John F. Kennedy. Sections on other biographies and their differences in the interpretation of Marilyn Monroe's life experiences have been reworked and expanded in the present version.

Narrating biographies, especially if the stories evolve around a historical persona, can conjure up a number of responses, ranging from examination and curiosity to (dis)belief and surprise, especially if the subject is a cultural icon like Marilyn Monroe, a.k.a. Norma Jeane Mortenson and Norma Jeane Baker. Facts and/or stories about her life are (re)invented since her untimely and ambiguous death in 1962. Several biographies of the subject delve into details of her experiences, claiming to represent "the real Marilyn" in some aspect. Norman Mailer's *Marilyn*, Gloria Steinem's *Marilyn/Norma Jean*, Anthony Summers' *Goddess: Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*, Susan Strasberg's *Marilyn and Me: Sisters, Rivals, Friends*, James Haspiel's *The Ultimate Look at the Legend* and Peter Harry Brown and Patte B. Barham's *Marilyn: The Last Take* are only a few examples among others. A number of printed photography collections often with explanations about the date and place near the captions add to the already existing images of Marilyn Monroe. James Haspiel's *The Unpublished Marilyn*, Jock Carroll's *Falling for Marilyn: The Lost Niagara Collection* are among such works.

The books that treat Marilyn Monroe as their subject are not only those that center around her life experiences. A 1992 publication titled *The Murder of Marilyn Monroe* is about channeling the spirits of Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy and a number of other spirits to reveal the facts surrounding her death. Books and photography collections only present part of the infatuation with this cultural icon. Every kind of memorabilia, from Marilyn dolls to calendars, is on the market, fan clubs exist, internet sites give all kind of information on her life, including her full autopsy report and FBI files on her political activities. Marilyn Monroe is (re)examined in every conceivable detail and turned into a commodity since her death, as the Andy Warhol lithographs with their multiple, colored images which create an almost grotesque effect suggest.

Marilyn Monroe has become larger than life and is viewed almost in legendary proportions, partly because the popular culture conjures up her images repeatedly. One way to explain this infatuation with Marilyn Monroe is the multiple images she has come to represent over the years. She embraces a number of binary oppositions simultaneously in her character. These oppositions in her representations obscure the "real" personality behind the image but, at the same time, allow the possibility of multiple interpretations. Just to name a few, she is a child/an adult, dumb/intelligent, innocent/sexy, married/single, loyal/disloyal, caring/indifferent, happy/sad, forsaken/popular and well-known/unknown. It is this last quality which

attracts all her biographers to (re)examine and write her biography over and over. Almost all biographies deal with at least one of the "unknown" sides to her personality. Her mother's nervous breakdowns and her father's identity, her multiple troublesome marriages especially the ones to Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller, her alleged affairs with President John F. Kennedy and the Attorney General Robert Kennedy, her abortion(s) and miscarriages and most of all her suicide or murder at the age of thirty-six are scrutinized thoroughly.

Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*, published in the year 2000, is the imagined life story of Marilyn Monroe. Oates defines *Blonde* as "a radically distilled 'life' in the form of fiction" and claims that "biographical facts regarding Marilyn Monroe should not be sought in *Blonde*, which is not intended as a historical document, but in biographies of the subject" (Author's note). She even lists the biographical works she has consulted as well as other intertextual references. Originally designed as a novella of young Norma Jean Baker's transformation to the white screen, Oates continues her story until Monroe's ambiguous death, giving up on the shorter form and embracing an "epic form to accommodate the complexities of the life" (Oates in Johnson 15). The result is a 1,400-page book, cut into 738 pages by the editors. Talking about the creation of such a lengthy work in an interview, she explains why she embarked upon such a task:

[...] I happened to see a photograph of the 17-year-old Norma Jeane Baker. [...] she looked nothing like the iconic "Marilyn Monroe." [...] this young, hopefully smiling girl, so very American, reminded me powerfully of girls of my childhood, some of them from broken homes. For days, I felt an almost rapturous sense of excitement, that I might give life to this lost, lone girl, whom the iconic-consumer product "Marilyn Monroe" would soon overwhelm and obliterate. I saw her story as mythical, archetypal; it would end when she loses her baptismal name Norma Jeane, and takes on the studio name "Marilyn Monroe." (Oates in Johnson 15)

So many images of the famous actress, like her pose over the subway grating in the white dress in *The Seven Year Itch* and her birthday song to President Kennedy, have been projected repeatedly on to the public consciousness that it is difficult for the readers to stay impartial while

interacting with the image Oates has created. Yet, whatever the readers' quintessential image of Marilyn Monroe is, Oates is able to create "a Cinderella Story without a happy ending" as she describes the text. The reader is confronted with Norma Jeane Baker's unstable mother, orphanages and foster homes, severe menstrual cramps, passion for acting, love affairs, marriages, addiction to tranquilizers, inner struggles and vulnerability from the point of an omniscient narrator intersected with her stream-of-consciousness and the stream-of-consciousness of those in her life. These inner musings are always given in italics throughout the book, offering a first hand experience to explore the possibilities of understanding and accepting the decisions of the characters. The omniscient voice constantly changes tense, at times assuming an almost documentary quality with a bird's-eye view of the described events. Some characters are defined with their occupations and/or qualities, some others are named. Giving generic, fairy tale names to characters—such as Beggar Maid, Dark Prince, Fair Princess, Ex-athlete, The Playwright, President's Pimp, Sharpshooter—is not Oates' "occasional coyness" as one critic suggests (Jacobs, 115). These names represent how the characters appear in their archetypal roles in Norma Jeane's and the readers' minds.

Joyce Carol Oates is not alone in creating Marilyn Monroe's fictionalized life. Other books and movies also blur the border between the factual and the fictional. John Rechy's *Marilyn's Daughter* is the story of Monroe's fictionalized daughter Normalyn who searches for her mother's legacy. Rechy builds his character on the rumor that Monroe had a daughter who was given to adoption. Oates does not go as far as Rechy in terms of fictionalizing the accounts, but she sometimes omits certain people and/or events in Monroe's life and substitutes them with imagined affairs. For example, she allows Marilyn the character to have love affairs with Charlie Chaplin's son, Cass C and Edward G. Robinson's son Eddie G. Despite her claims that the work is a novel, most of the facts, such as Norma Jeane's three marriages, her movie characters, her moral trips to boost the morale of American troops in Korea in 1954 and her birthday salute to President Kennedy remain the same. By keeping such details in their factual form and adding her subjects' inner voices in a "posthumous narration" (Oates in Johnson 15), Oates (re)creates the Marilyn Monroe image in the reader's mind. Her psychological realism allows the reader to sympathize with Norma Jeane beyond her iconic representation. She wants the readers to understand Marilyn Monroe with all her opposing qualities and seek to capture the multiplicity of her experiences. Oates prefers to apply the novel form to imagine what the other biographers leave out.

Joyce Carol Oates' character Norma Jeane Baker possesses certain characteristics of Oates' typical women characters. She is led by the men in her life, she plays roles to be accepted, she is yielding and vulnerable, subjected to sex and/or verbal or physical violence, and most notably she possesses a hidden side to her personality, unknown even to those who are the closest. Oates is fond of describing women characters that are—or prefer to stay—out of the gaze of the community. They are either from the impoverished section of the society or they prefer to stay invisible in their surroundings. Even when they crave for attention, they are unable to receive it. Norma Jeane/Marilyn starts as such a character but moves to the focus of attention. In this novel, Oates is making an exception by placing a famous personality in the center.

Blonde starts with a "Prologue: 3 August 1962" in which Death is personified as bringing a special delivery and continues in five major sections: "The Child: 1932-1938"; "The Girl: 1942-1947"; "The Woman: 1949-1953"; "Marilyn: 1953-1958" and "The Afterlife: 1959-1963." The prologue recalls the Emily Dickinson poem "Because I could not stop for Death, / He kindly stopped for me; / The Carriage held but just Ourselves / And Immortality" (492). The poem is also cited to the child Norma Jeane by her mother in the first part of the novel. The prologue sets the mood of a movement toward death, which the reader already knows. In other words, Oates is creating a story with a well-known end. Therefore, she is going to sustain the reader's interest through other literary devices.

One of Oates' literary devices is to use recurrent motifs, such as the preoccupation with the identity of a lost father. Norma Jeane's mother, Gladys, shows her six-year-old daughter a photograph of the man who is supposedly Norma Jeane's father. As a child, Norma Jeane is led to believe that her father is an important Hollywood personality, living at the house on top of the hill. Her imagination goes further so as to confuse movie personalities with her father. As years pass, Norma Jeane associates the father image with a number of other personalities in her life: the next door neighbor, her boyfriends, her husbands and her managers. In fact, she calls them "Daddy" on several occasions. When she starts receiving letters from her "father" her hopes for a reunion is rekindled. At the end she learns that these letters were created and sent by her onetime homosexual lover Cass Chaplin. The factual Marilyn has also made various references to her absent father. In an interview she says: "For years I thought having a father and being married meant happiness. I've never had a father—you can't buy

them!—but I've been married three times and haven't found permanent happiness yet" (Weatherby 147).

In the novel, as an orphan, Norma Jeane tries to fill her loneliness in a number of ways. One of her reactions is to constantly look in the mirror. She calls her image "The Magic Friend" and enters into conversations with it. This act can be viewed as the first stages of Norma Jeane's schizoid division of identity. Several biographers, including Mailer have examined Marilyn's preoccupation with her image in the mirrors. The factual Marilyn comments on her act:

[...] we actors and actresses are such worriers, such—what is your word—Narcissus types. I sit in front of the mirror for hours looking for signs of age. Yet I like old people. They have great qualities younger people don't have. I want to grow old without face lifts. They take the life out of a face, the character. I want to have the courage to be loyal to the face I've made. (Weatherby 147)

In *Blonde*, Norma Jeane is created and destroyed in front of mirrors. Makeup becomes a metaphor in the book. Her first husband is a part time embalmer's assistant and brings home tools of his trade to put on his wife for some sexual fun. Later she is probed by Whitey, her makeup man, which is described as "he vowed he would conjure up 'Marilyn' within an hour, & this they tried [...] her embalmer laboring over her with pastes & powders & pencils & tubes of color [...] there emerged [...] the most beautiful face she'd ever seen [...]" (625-626). Bleaching her hair is also a source of discomfort. The process stings her scalp and skin. Eventually, near the end, Marilyn Monroe becomes the persona Norma Jeane fears and dislikes.

[...] I am trapped here! I am trapped in this blonde mannequin with the face. I can only breathe through that face. Those nostrils! That mouth! Help me to be perfect. God is not in us, we know this for we are not perfect. I don't want money and fame. I want only to be perfect. The blonde mannequin Monroe is me and is not me. She is not me. She is what I was born. Yes I want you to love her. So you will love me. Oh, I want to love you! Where are you! I look and look and there's no one there. (Oates, 616)

Norma Jeane's mirror image is also tied to her astrological sign Gemini, which is represented in the form of twins. In *Blonde*, Norma Jeane is obsessed with finding her soul-mate, her twin, which she comes closest to in her relationship with another Gemini in the novel, Cass Chaplin, who happens to have his own soul-mate Eddy G. The threesome is happy until Norma Jeane is impregnated by one of her Gemini lovers, and eventually decides to have an abortion and leaves them both.

The real Marilyn Monroe was aware of her Gemini personalities. In an interview, the following dialogue occurs:

"What kind of people are Geminis"

"Jekyll and Hyde. Two in One."

"And that's you?"

"More than two. I'm so many people. They shock me sometimes. I wish I was just me! I used to think maybe I was going crazy, until I discovered some people I admire were like that, too. (Weatherby 150-151)

Norma Jeane in *Blonde* is able to transform her many personalities in the characters she represented in films. These screen personalities become part of her, and she becomes part of them which furthers her personality division, destroying her sense of wholeness. In time, the border between Norma Jeane and the characters she personifies blur completely. She becomes, Rose in *Niagara*, Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, The Girl Upstairs in *The Seven Year Itch*, Cherie in *Bus Stop*, Showgirl in *The Prince and the Showgirl*, Roslyn in *Misfits*, Nude swimmer in her last incomplete movie, *Something's Got to Give*.

Among all her movie personalities, *The Seven Year Itch* plays a major role in shaping Marilyn Monroe's image. Her pose on the subway grating iconizes her. Oates describes the scene as:

The American Goddess of Love on the Subway Grating, New York City 1954

A lush-bodied girl in the prime of her physical beauty. In an ivory georgette crepe sundress with a halter top that gathers her breasts up in soft undulating folds of the fabric. She is standing with bare legs apart on a New York subway grating. (472)

Yet this poetic description is juxtaposed immediately with an act of violence when her husband, the Ex-athlete, hits her with rage, screaming, "*Whore! Are you proud showing your crouch like that, on the street! My wife!*" (474). Historically, there is no mention of this form of violence, but Joe DiMaggio was obviously unhappy with the scene, reportedly leaving the spot.

Another famous Marilyn Monroe performance is her birthday salute to President John F. Kennedy in Madison Square Garden in New York City on May 19, 1962. The performance, although lasting for a very short time, is remembered with Marilyn's ostentatious dress, literally sewn nude on her, the refusal of the first lady to attend the show, and most of all Marilyn's suggestive sexy and breathy voice which the public interpreted as the justification of the affair between Marilyn and the President:

Thanks Mr. President, for all the things you've done,
the battles that you've won, the way you deal with US
Steel and our problems by the ton, we thank you so
much. Everybody—"Happy Birthday" (Monroe)

And the president responds: "I can now retire from
politics after having had 'Happy Birthday' sung to me in
such a sweet, wholesome way." (Monroe)

Oates turns this whole episode upside down by displaying it pathetically. In her version, Monroe is very uncomfortable in the dress. She is also quite drunk and barely keeps herself from falling as she sings:

As the President gazed down at MARILYN MONROE
cooing seductively to him, one of his buddies nudged
him in the ribs *Hope she fucks better than she sings Prez*
and the witty Prez muttered around his cigar *No but,*
fucking her, you don't have to listen to her sing, which
cracked up everybody in the box. (Oates 721)

Through such episodes, Oates aims to show how Marilyn Monroe is violated sexually and verbally. In fact, Oates is quite comfortable and explicit with displaying intimate details of Norma Jeane's sex life. Lee Siegel observes that previous biographers like Mailer avoided sexual details in their biographies but Oates is "crudely invasive where she thinks she is artistically daring. She hurls herself at Monroe's sexual experiences again and again, as if to win back her subject's sexuality from the clutches of the male

sensibility; but in their literalness, and self congratulatory tone, and in their mock objectivity, these sexual passages are hard to read" (38).

Oates' narrative approach also involves cultural criticism of how such images affect American audience and their perceptions of Marilyn Monroe. The audience is only affected by the surface reality, not the character behind the image. By presenting Marilyn Monroe's imagined story, Oates fills the blanks for the reader and allows them to be part of Marilyn Monroe's physiological and psychological situation until the very end.

Oates prefers to present Marilyn Monroe's death as a murder by a government agent, Sharpshooter, who injects a "six-inch needle to the hilt into her heart" (Oates 737). The last section of *Blonde* ends with the dying Norma Jeane remembering her mother showing the photograph of her absent father. The scene is similar to Norman Mailer's biography, where Mailer refers to Marilyn as the "fatherless child" (248). Marilyn Monroe's story is rendered whole in both Oates' and Mailer's works. There is no future projection as in Gloria Steinem's biography which offers a series of possible futures for Marilyn as "a student, lawyer, teacher artist, mother, grandmother, defender of animals, rancher, homemaker, sportswoman, rescuer of children" (180).

Oates ends her story where Marilyn's story ends, seeking, thus, to accomplish in a way what Marilyn had always wanted to accomplish, to have a complete, unified self. Ironically, the real Marilyn says, "Sometimes I think it would be easier to avoid old age, to die young, but then you'd never complete your life, would you? You'd never wholly know yourself" (Weatherby 147). Oates does not present Norma Jeane/Marilyn Monroe's story as incomplete; rather, she presents the full description of a woman who was able to attain the American Dream of success by creating herself which, unfortunately, caused her own destruction. In this sense, Oates' narrative is not open-ended.

In Paul Auster's "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," which is later adopted as the last movie scene in *Smoke*, two characters have a conversation in a coffee shop. One narrates a real life experience, full of likely but surprising chance encounters. After the narration is over, the listener asks whether or not the experience is true. The narrator remarks "as long as there's one person to believe it, there is no story that can't be true" (Auster). Upon the remark, both the teller and the listener grin suggestively. Joyce Carol Oates may have claimed to have created a fiction but she has presented her material in such a way that it is easy to fall into the trap of con-

sidering it factual, just like the listener in Paul Auster's story. After reading *Blonde*, Marilyn Monroe is certainly not the same in the reader's consciousness. As one of the characters in the CBS four-hour-miniseries of *Blonde* remarks, "she [isn't] a dumb blonde. She [isn't] a blonde and she [isn't] dumb" (Storm). Both Norma Jeane and Marilyn Monroe gain a different resolution and sharper definition in Oates' narrative.

Works Cited

- Auster, Paul. "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story." Esther Schönwandt, ed. *Christmas Magazine*. 20 Oct. 2002. <<http://www.christmasmagazine.com/english/spirit/story10.asp>>
- Baty, Paige S. *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- Brown, Peter Harry and Patte B. Barham. *Marilyn: The Last Take*. New York: Dutton Books, 1992.
- Canevari, Leonora et al. *The Murder of Marilyn Monroe*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1992.
- Carroll, Jock. *Falling for Marilyn: The Lost Niagara Collection*. London: Virgin Books, 1996.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Vol. 1. Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1998.
- Federman, Raymond. *The Supreme Indecision of the Writer: The 1994 Lectures in Turkey*. Ankara: Hacettepe University, Department of American Culture and Literature, 1995.
- Haspiel, James. *The Ultimate Look at the Legend*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1991.
- Haspiel, James. *The Unpublished Marilyn*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2000.
- Jacobs, Rita D. "Blonde." *World Literature Today* 75.1 (2001): 115.
- Johnson, Greg. "Blonde Ambition: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates" *Prairie Schooner* 75.3 (2001): 15.
- Mailer, Norman. *Marilyn*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973.
- Monroe, Marilyn "Happy Birthday Mr. President" *All But Forgotten Oldies*. August 25, 2002. <<http://www.allbutforgottenoldies.net/yourpicks/oldies-february-songs.html>>
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *Blonde: A Novel*. New York: The Ecco Press, 2000.
- Rechy, John. *Marilyn's Daughter*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1988.
- Siegel, Lee. "Survival of the Misfittest" *New Republic* 10 July 2000: 38.
- Steinem, Gloria. *Marilyn/Norma Jean*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986.
- Storm, Jonathan. "Blonde Airing Sunday and Wednesday Nights on CBS." *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*. 9 May 2001: pK0274.
- Strasberg, Susan. *Marilyn and Me: Sisters, Rivals, Friends*. New York: Warner Books, 1992.
- Summers, Anthony. *Goddess: Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*. London: Sphere Books Limited, 1990. (First print 1985).
- Weatherby, W. J. *Conversations with Marilyn*. New York: Paragon House, 1992.