

The Dark Side of Adolescent Girls' Minds in "The Corn Maiden: A Love Story"
by Joyce Carol Oates

Miho Morii, Otsuma Women's University, Japan

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Abstract

The Corn Maiden: A Love Story (2005) by Joyce Carol Oates tells the story of an 11-year-old blonde girl with a learning disability, Marissa Bantry, who is kidnapped and held captive by 13-year-old Jude Trahern and her friends. Eventually, Marissa is rescued, and Jude commits self-immolation. Other characters include Marissa's single mother, Leah, and Mikal Zallman, a part-time math teacher and computer consultant at the school Marissa and Jude attend. Despite coming from a wealthy and prestigious family, Jude's parents divorced when she was young, and she now lives in a large mansion with her grandmother. Jude has grown up feeling neglected and is unable to tolerate the seemingly happy mother-daughter relationship between Leah and Marissa. Additionally, Jude has a strong desire for approval and feels resentful when Zallman does not pay her the attention she seeks, leading her to frame him for Marissa's kidnapping. While Oates meticulously portrays the frustration and anger lurking within the hearts of adolescent girls in this novel, she seems to imply that they need the kind of unconditional love that Leah shows to Marissa. In this paper, I will analyze the darkness in the minds of adolescent girls from a psychological perspective, exploring how Jude's self-destructive behavior emphasizes the novel's message about the essential role of genuine love from others in our lives.

Keywords: Joyce Carol Oates, *The Corn Maiden: A Love Story*, Adolescent Girls

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Introduction

In *The Corn Maiden: A Love Story* (2005) by Joyce Carol Oates, the story centers on Marissa Bantry, an 11-year-old blonde girl with learning disabilities, who is kidnapped and held captive by 13-year-old Jude Trahern and her friends. Marissa is eventually rescued, and Jude burns herself to death. Other important characters include Leah, Marissa's single mother, and Mikal Zallman, a part-time math teacher and computer consultant at the school where both Jude and Marissa are students. Jude finds it unforgivable to see Marissa and Leah seemingly happy as mother and daughter. Moreover, Jude has a deep need for approval and becomes resentful when Zallman does not treat her in the way she desires. As a result, she manipulates the situation to make it appear as though Zallman is the one who kidnapped Marissa.

Oates said the following about Jude in the interview by Vanessa Becknell (2012):

Jude is yearning to be loved—to have a true, loving mother as the Corn Maiden has; therefore, she wants to appropriate the Corn Maiden as herself. And when it comes to the sacrifice, she realizes this: it is herself who must be sacrificed, not the innocent girl. So Jude is really not, finally, such a villain; she does the “decent” thing.

Oates uses the character of Jude in this novel to intricately depict the irritation and anger lurking in the hearts of adolescent girls, while subtly suggesting that they need unconditional love, like the love Leah shows to Marissa. In this paper, I will analyze the darkness within the minds of adolescent girls from a psychological perspective, considering Jude's motivation for kidnapping Marissa and her strong desire to be noticed and appreciated, which comes from the lack of love she should have received from her parents.

Jude's Motive for Kidnapping Marissa

Jeff VanderMeer (2012), in his review of “The Corn Maiden” for *The Guardian*, comments on Jude's motive for committing the crime.

Indeed, Jude's evil genius lies in realising that with a single action she can hurt several people at once.

But Jude's motivations aren't really part of the focus, dismissed early on in a confession by the disturbed teen: “Because it was an experiment to see if God would allow it. That's why.”

Thus, VanderMeer interprets Jude's motive for this incident as not being the focus of the story because she does not clearly state her motive, but is this really the case? On the contrary, what Oates wants to depict in this novel may be found in the motive that is not mentioned by Jude. Here, I will explore the darkness of Jude's heart by considering her true motive for kidnapping Marissa and sacrificing her by imitating Indian rituals.

Jude provides various motives for the kidnapping of Marissa. For example, the novel begins with the line, “Why why you're asking here's why her hair” (Oates, 2011, p. 1), which can be interpreted as “Jude's motive for kidnapping Marissa is her hair.” Additionally, Jude mentions the following motives:

Here's why in sixth grade a field trip to the museum of natural history and Jude wandered off from the silly giggling children to stare at the Onigara exhibit of the Sacrifice of the Corn Maiden ... you stepped through an archway into a fluorescent-lit interior of dusty display cases to stare at the Corn Maiden with braided black bristles for hair and flat face and blind eyes and mouth widened in an expression of permanent wonder beyond even terror and it was that vision that entered Jude's heart powerful as any arrow shot into the Corn Maiden's heart that is why.

Because it was an experiment to see if God would allow it that is why.

Because there was no one to stop me that is why. (Oates, 2011, p. 2)

In this way, Jude seems to list various motives for kidnapping Marissa on a whim, but, as VanderMeer points out, none of these motives provide a valid reason for the abduction. If we look closer at these motives, questions arise: Why would Marissa's hair be a motive for kidnapping? Why did Jude feel the need to imitate the Onigara Indian ritual? Why did she have to test whether God would forgive her? Additionally, why did she resort to crime simply because no one stopped her? However, Jude offers no answers to these questions.

The ritual of the Onigara Indians, which Jude cites as the motive for Marissa's kidnapping, is described by Jude herself as follows:

In the Onigara ceremony Jude said the Corn Maiden was slowly starved and her bowels cleaned out and purified and she was tied on an altar still living and a priest shot an arrow that had been blessed into her heart. And the heart was scooped out with a knife that had been blessed and touched to the lips of the priest and others of the tribe to bless them. And the heart and the Corn Maiden's body were then carried out into a field and buried in the earth to honor the Morning Star which is the sun and the Evening Star which is the moon and beg of them their blessing for the corn harvest. (Oates, 2011, p. 69)

This story reveals that the Onigara Indians have a reason for sacrificing the kidnapped girl, which is to pray for a good corn harvest—a necessity for their survival.

On the first page of the novel, there is a note that reads, "Note The Sacrifice of the Corn Maiden is a composite drawn from traditional sacrificial rituals of the Iroquois, Pawnee, and Blackfoot Indian tribes" (Oates, 2011, p. 1). Among these, the Pawnee Tribe did, in fact, kidnap and kill young women from other tribes as sacrifices. George E. Hyde (1974) explains the reason why the Pawnee Tribe sacrificed young women: "But the mass of the Skidi [Pawnee] tribe ... were still convinced that if the sacrifices were given up crops would fail and the tribe would be overwhelmed by every form of misfortune" (p. 162). In other words, young women were sacrificed by the Pawnee Tribe to pray for a good harvest and to protect themselves from misfortune. Furthermore, Ralph Linton (1926) describes the Pawnee Tribe's methods of kidnapping and brutally killing these sacrificial victims:

As soon as a girl of suitable age was captured the attack ceased and the war party returned. The girl was dedicated to the Morning Star at the moment of her capture and was given into the care of the leader of the party who, on its return, turned her over to the chief of the Morning Star village. During the time preceding the sacrifice she was

treated with kindness and respect, but it was forbidden to give her any article of clothing. (p. 457)

When the Morning Star appeared, two men came from the east with flaming brands and touched her lightly in the arm pits and groins. Four other men then touched her with war clubs. The man who had captured her then ran forward with the bow from the Skull bundle and a sacred arrow and shot her through the heart while another man struck her on the head with the war club from the Morning Star bundle. (p. 459)

It can be said that the Pawnee Tribe's Morning Star sacrifice ritual is reflected in the ritual of the fictional Onigara Indians created by Oates.

However, Jude is neither a member of the Onigara Indians nor in an environment where she must pray for a good harvest. Therefore, there is no reason for her to imitate the Onigara Indians' ritual by offering a sacrifice. In other words, the original meaning of the Onigara Indians' sacrificial ritual, which is to pray for a good harvest, holds no significance for Jude. What matters to her is punishing Leah and Marissa for displaying the happiness of a parent and child—a happiness she herself can never have. This is because Jude confesses the following: "There was her mother [Leah]. I saw them together. I saw the mother stoop to kiss *her*. That arrow entered my heart. I thought I *will make you see me*. I would not forgive" (Oates, 2011, p. 1).

The "you" in this passage clearly seems to refer to Marissa's mother, Leah. It can be assumed that Jude, upon seeing the close relationship between Leah and Marissa—between a mother and daughter—feels jealous of the happiness they share, a happiness she can never experience herself. She feels anger toward Leah for giving her love to Marissa instead of to her. From Leah's perspective, it is only natural for her to show love to her own daughter, and she has no reason to be resented by Jude for doing so. Jude's complex emotions may have been shaped by the fact that, despite her wealth, she was raised in an environment where her parents were divorced, and she was unable to receive their love.

Another important factor to consider is that Jude is going through adolescence. In a review by *The Guardian*, VanderMeer (2012) describes Jude as "the disturbed teen." Furthermore, *Kirkus Review* (2011) views Jude as "severely disturbed." These reviews interpret Jude as if she were mentally ill, but is she truly suffering from a mental illness? Anna Freud (1958), the daughter of Sigmund Freud and a psychoanalyst herself, discusses the psychological symptoms of adolescence:

The adolescent manifestations come close to symptom formation of the neurotic, psychotic or dissocial order and merge almost imperceptibly into borderline states, initial, frustrated or fully fledged forms of almost all the mental illnesses. Consequently, the differential diagnosis between the adolescent upsets and true pathology becomes a difficult task. (p. 267)

Adolescence can be a time of mental instability, making it difficult to distinguish between symptoms that are unique to this stage of life and actual mental illness. Jude's act of kidnapping Marissa for sacrifice may seem pathological, but it is premature to conclude that Jude is mentally ill. If we labeled her as mentally ill, her crime would simply be seen as an act of madness. As Oates stated in the interview by Becknell, "So Jude is really not, finally,

such a villain; she does the ‘decent’ thing.” This suggests that Jude’s emotions are more complex, rooted in adolescence, and cannot be easily dismissed as a mental illness.

Denise and Anita are holding Marissa captive with Jude, and one of them confesses the following about drugs:

Fifth grade, Jude instructed us how to get HIGH sniffing S. Where Jude got S., we didn’t know.

Seventh grade, Jude gave us X. Like the older kids take. From her secret contact at the high school Jude got X. (Oates, 2011, p. 3)

School counselor Lisa Damour (2016) discusses children who get involved with drugs at an early age.

Who is most likely to experiment with sex, drugs, or drinking at an early age? Psychological science consistently points to two factors: disproportionately, girls on the fast track come from disrupted families or lack a close relationship with at least one parent. The link between having a difficult family life and early risky behavior often comes down to low levels of supervision.... Left alone (and often becoming lonesome), girls sometimes go looking for trouble. (p. 41)

Jude fits the criteria of children who try drugs early, as mentioned by Damour. She lives with her indifferent grandmother, having lost both her father and mother. Their relationship is more like that of mere housemates, lacking any emotional connection. The family has fallen apart, and she has not experienced a close relationship with either parent. In other words, Jude has reached the eighth grade without receiving any love that should have come from her family.

Damour states that there is a lack of supervision of children, and Jude is exactly in that situation. Jude’s kidnapping and imprisonment of Marissa can be seen as a form of revenge against the parents and society of a child who has been left alone (and has come to feel lonely). Behind Jude’s attempts to justify Marissa’s kidnapping with seemingly unfounded motives lies a cry for love from someone she may not even realize she desires. Jude cannot openly express this longing, so she can only express it through her distorted actions of kidnapping Marissa. In other words, Jude’s motive for kidnapping Marissa can be seen as jealousy of the parental love that a teenager, who should normally receive it, is unable to obtain, as well as a longing for that very parental love.

Jude’s Desire to Show off Herself

The relationship between Mikal Zallman and Jude is solely that Zallman is a part-time math teacher and computer advisor at Jude’s school. Jude secretly admires him, referring to him as “Mr. Z.” However, Zallman is completely unaware of Jude’s feelings, and as a result, she resents him and frames him as the culprit in Marissa’s kidnapping. Here, by analyzing the relationship between Jude and Zallman, I will explore whether Jude’s desire to show off herself is actually a reflection of her deep longing for genuine love as an adolescent girl.

Jude’s feelings for Mr. Z are expressed as follows:

Mr. Z.! Maybe he'd smelled her underarms. She hoped he had not smelled her crotch.

Mr. Z. in computer lab . . . she'd have liked to catch his eye and exchange a knowing smirk but Mr. Z. never seemed to be looking toward her and then she was stricken with shyness, blood rushing into her face as he paused above her to examine the confusion on her screen and she heard herself mutter with childish bravado *Guess I fucked up, Mr. Zallman, huh?* wiping her nose on the edge of her hand beginning to giggle and there was sexy/cool Mr. Z. six inches from her not breaking into a smile even of playful reproach giving not the slightest hint he'd heard the forbidden F-word from an eighth grade girl's innocent mouth. (Oates, 2011, pp. 31-2)

As can be seen from this, it is no exaggeration to say that Jude is in love with Zallman. However, when she realizes that her feelings will not reach him, Jude undergoes a drastic change.

Mr. Z. she'd sent an e-message *you are a master mister z....* But Mr. Z. had not replied.

So easy to reply to a fucking e-message! But Mr. Z. had not.

Mr. Z. did not exchange a knowing smile/wink with her as you'd expect.
Ignored her!

Like he didn't know which one of them she was.

Like he could confuse her with *those others* her inferiors.

And so something turned in her heart like a rusty key and she thought calmly, *You will pay for this mister asshole Z. and all your progeny.* (Oates, 2011, pp. 32-3)

In this way, having grown up without her parents and without knowing the love of adults, Jude briefly desires to be noticed and acknowledged by her teacher, Zallman, who is a close presence in her life. However, Zallman never hears Jude's inner cry. Zallman's impression of Jude is as follows:

Afterward vaguely he would recall *you are a master mister z* but of course he'd deleted it. So easy to delete an e-message.

Afterward vaguely he would recall the squirmy girl at the computer with the frizz hair and glassy staring eyes, a startling smell as of unwashed flesh wafting from her (unusual at Skatskill Day as it was unusual in the affluent suburban village of Skatskill) he had not known at the time, this was January/February, was Jude Trahern. (Oates, 2011, p. 33)

To Zallman, Jude is not a particularly memorable student. He does not see Jude as an individual, but rather as an unstable adolescent girl.

And so he joked, "Here's the famous hacker, eh?—he knew it was the kindest as it was the wisest strategy to make a joke of the audacious/inexplicable behavior of adolescents, it wasn't a good idea to confront or embarrass. Especially not a girl...."

Eye brows and lashes scanty, near-invisible. She was so fiercely plain and her unbeautiful eyes stared at him so *rawly*.... He felt sorry for her, poor kid. Bold, nervy, but in another year or so she'd be left behind entirely by her classmates, no boy would glance at her twice.... He laughed and dismissed her with a wave of his hand. Had an impulse, out of character for him, to reach out and tousele that frizzed floating hair as you'd rub a dog's head partly in affection and partly to chastise.

Didn't touch her, though. Mikal Zallman wasn't crazy. (Oates, 2011, p. 34)

Zallman says it was wise of him not to have touched Jude, but if he had gently patted her on the head and offered her a few kind words, Jude might not have committed such a crime.

Education scholar Toshiyuki Kasugai (2006) describes what is important when interacting with adolescents.

Various troubles that adolescents experience during their growth, such as school refusal, bullying, and disruptive behavior, can be seen as "crises." At the same time, depending on how adults engage with them, these crises can become opportunities for growth. Children's troubles are an SOS to the adults and friends around them, and understanding the children begins by considering who they are reaching out to and what kind of help they are seeking. In this way, interactions that make use of the roles of parents and teachers can help turn children's "crises" into opportunities for growth. (p. 189)

If there had been adults around Jude who approached her with this kind of attitude, her behavior might have been very different. It can also be interpreted that the indifference of the adults around her led to Jude's reckless actions.

Furthermore, Kasugai (2006) highlights three important points regarding the attitudes of parents and teachers towards children: (1) the reaffirmation that "there is nothing more important than life" (p. 189), (2) the importance of offering "unconditional love" (p. 190), and (3) the need to consistently convey the message "I am on your side no matter what" (p. 191). For Jude, who could not expect "unconditional love" or the assurance of "being on her side no matter what" from her parents, Zallman was likely the only adult she could turn to for that. Although Zallman was chosen as an adult by Jude, he failed to recognize this. Rather, it can be said that he had no intention of genuinely engaging with any of his students, not just Jude. In contrast, the love Leah pours into Marissa can be seen as "unconditional love." Oates emphasizes the importance of having an adult nearby whom children can consult by portraying Marissa, who receives unconditional love from her mother, and Jude, who seeks love from her teacher after being deprived of parental affection.

It is inevitable that Jude, who lacks parents and has a tenuous relationship with her grandmother, has developed a personality that struggles to form connections with others. It is also not difficult to imagine how challenging it has been for such a person to establish her own identity. Erik H. Erikson (1968) states that an individual's identity is formed through intimate relationships with others:

It is only when identity formation is well on its way that true intimacy—which is really a counterpointing as well as a fusing of identities—is possible.... The youth who is not sure of his identity shies away from interpersonal intimacy or throws

himself into acts of intimacy which are “promiscuous” without true fusion or real self-abandon.

Where a youth does not accomplish such intimate relationships with others—and, I would add, with his own inner resources ... he may settle for highly stereotyped interpersonal relations and come to retain a deep *sense of isolation*. (pp. 135-6)

Jude is an American girl born into a prestigious family and is currently in the eighth grade. However, there is a crucial element missing: she does not have the identity of being “someone’s daughter.” In other words, Jude’s lack of parents may contribute to her uncertainty about her own identity. Therefore, it is possible that Jude lives without fully understanding what interpersonal intimacy is, rather than hesitating to engage in it. Growing up without parental love, Jude may have entered adolescence feeling lost about who she is, becoming frustrated, and resorting to the drastic act of kidnapping Marissa as a way to cope with that frustration. The kidnapping of Marissa might have been Jude’s attempt at self-expression in her effort to establish her identity.

Jude’s kidnapping of Marissa is an act of self-expression directed at Leah and Zallman, who leave no room for Jude’s existence. Leah, who demonstrates unconditional love for her daughter, and Zallman, who completely ignores Jude, symbolize the “love” that Jude knows she can never attain. Growing up in a unique family environment and being in the midst of adolescence, Jude has misdirected her way of seeking that “love.”

Conclusion

As seen so far, Oates illustrates the importance of true love given by others in life through the character of Jude, a troubled adolescent girl. When Jude ultimately realizes that her attempt to sacrifice Marissa fails, she resorts to self-immolation; this impulsive act can be attributed to her being a girl experiencing adolescence. Anna Freud (1958) discusses the challenges of dealing with adolescents:

While an adolescent remains inconsistent and unpredictable in his behavior, he may suffer, but he does not seem to me to be in need of treatment. I think that he should be given time and scope to work out his own solution. Rather, it may be his parents who need help and guidance so as to be able to bear with him. There are few situations in life which are more difficult to cope with than an adolescent son or daughter during the attempt to liberate themselves. (p. 276)

As Freud suggests, the world in which Jude lives, while going through the most challenging period of life—adolescence—is a very small one centered around school and home. If she could just overcome this difficult stage of adolescence, her world might expand significantly, and she might even forget what she was dissatisfied with. It can only be considered unfortunate for Jude that there are no adults to teach her such things. Through this work, Oates appears to emphasize the importance of “unconditional love” provided by adults for adolescents striving to grow into adulthood.

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