

**“I am not my father, I am scarcely myself”:**

**The Construction of Identity in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Tattooed Girl***

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Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen identiteetin rakentumista Joyce Carol Oatesin romaanissa *The Tattooed Girl* (2003). Tutkin sitä, millaisista palasista yksilön identiteetti muodostuu ja miten yksilön toimijuus vaikuttaa tähän prosessiin. Pohdin erityisesti sitä, missä määrin yksilön on itse mahdollista rakentaa omaa identiteettiään ja vastaavasti kuinka paljon identiteetti rakentuu ulkoapäin, yhteiskunnan ja yksilön lähipiirin vaikutuksesta. Lisäksi analysoin väkivallan ja identiteetin suhdetta sekä kielen, kirjallisuuden ja kirjoittamisen merkitystä identiteetin rakentumisessa.

Tutkimukseni teoreettinen pohja perustuu erityisesti kahteen teoreettiseen lähtökohtaan. Ensimmäinen lähestyn aiheitani kulttuurintutkimuksen näkökulmasta, jossa hyödynnän ennen kaikkea Stuart Hallin ajatuksia identiteetin rakentumisesta toiseuden kautta. Tämän näkemyksen mukaan yksilön identiteetti on fiktio, joka muodostuu dialogisesti ympäröivän yhteiskunnan kanssa. Tutkimukseni keskiössä on erityisesti kysymys juutalaisuudesta toiseuden näkökulmasta.

Toinen hyödyntämäni teoria on Jacques Lacanin psykoanalyysin kenttään sijoittuva ajatus subjektin muotoutumisesta osittain visuaalisuuden kautta. Ulkopuolelta subjektiin kohdistuva Katse on perustavanlaatuisessa osassa subjektin muodostumisessa, sillä juuri Katseen kautta subjekti tajuaa oman autonomisuutensa. Toisaalta Katse myös rajoittaa subjektin vapautta, sillä sen kautta subjektista tulee objekti, katsojasta katsottu.

Ensimmäisessä analyysiosiossani käsittelen kahden päähenkilön, Joshuan ja Alman, identiteettien rakentumista toiseuden näkökulmasta. Joshuan tapauksessa keskityn ennen kaikkea juutalaisuuden ja perhehistorian merkitykseen. Almaa taas tutkin häneen ulkopuolelta kohdistuvien, ulkonäöstä johtuvien odotusten ja ennakkoluulojen kautta. Lisäksi analysoin väkivallan merkitystä niin yksilön kuin yhdysvaltalaisen kansallisidentiteetin rakentumisessa.

Toisessa analyysiosiossani keskityn kielen, kirjallisuuden ja kirjoittamisen merkitykseen identiteetin muokkaamisessa. Analyysini apuna käytän myös metafiktio käsitettä. Kiinnittämällä huomiota teoksen keinoitekoisuuteen ja kirjallisen teoksen syntyprosessiin metafiktio viittaa myös ympäröivän todellisuuden fiktiivisyyteen. Todellisuus, kuten identiteetti, on vakiintumaton konstruktio, jonka voi näin ollen haastaa tai jota voi muokata.

Asiasanat: Joyce Carol Oates, identiteetti, juutalaisuus, Jacques Lacan, väkivalta, metafiktio

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## 1 Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates' enormous body of work refuses easy labelling. Since her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*, was released in 1964, she has published in various genres. Therefore she does not fall without difficulty into any single category of the American literary scene since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oates herself has described many of her works as “psychological realism”: the emphasis in her novels is on the characters' inner life, meaning their thoughts and motives for action. Although her works are mostly realistic in nature, she has often experimented with the novel form. For example, many of her novels feature techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue. In addition to her realist fiction, she has written a Gothic trilogy. Susan Allen Ford notes that there are elements of the Gothic in her realist fiction as well, especially in the way she scrutinizes “the claustal structures of the self and of America” (2002, 304). Her oeuvre also includes suspense novels, which she has written under the pseudonyms Rosamond Smith and Lauren Kelly.

Oates often writes about social issues and the dark side of the American dream. Thus her works are thematically quite similar to Philip Roth's, for example. Recurring themes in her works are racial tension, gender and class issues, and identity. According to Ford, Oates' works are narratives about people whose identities are threatened by the disintegrating and dehumanizing world around them (2002, 304). This bleak view of the world is emphasized by the fact that many of her works contain graphic depictions of violence, for which she has often been criticized. She has explained the violent nature of her novels as something that is a part of modern American society and therefore cannot be ignored. She argues that violence is simply a sign of the times:

I have tried to give a shape to certain obsessions of mid-century Americans – a confusion of love and money, of the categories of public and private experience, of the demonic urge I sense all around me, an urge to violence as the answer to all problems, an urge to self-annihilation, suicide, the ultimate experience and the ultimate surrender. (Conn 1989, 533–534)

This thesis deals with the novel *The Tattooed Girl*, which was originally published in 2003. The main character of the novel is Joshua Seigl, a respected author who has published his first and only novel, *The Shadows*, several years previously. He is thought of as a Jewish author, because his best-selling novel dealt with the Holocaust, and he comes from a notable Jewish family. Joshua, however, does not identify himself as Jewish, since Jewishness is based on matrilineal descent. His mother was not Jewish and he has not undergone the formal process of conversion, which means that he is in fact not Jewish. Nevertheless, he is perceived as such by people around him. During the years since the release of his novel he has been struggling with both his writing and his health. Therefore he decides to hire an assistant, and chooses Alma, a young woman with no qualifications, a past that is shady at best, and a body marred with grotesque tattoos, the origins of which are never fully detailed. The only explanation she gives for them is that they were a result of an assault by unidentified men.

There is a great divide in *The Tattooed Girl* between the public behaviour of the characters and their private thoughts. None of them are what they at first appear to be. Oates has in fact dedicated her novel to Philip Roth, whose novel *The Human Stain* shares some of the same themes: questions of identity and the idea of “passing” as something or someone you are not. Originally “passing” meant the ability of some black people to pass as white but its meaning has broadened to include other social groups as well. Elaine K. Ginsberg explains that “passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties” (1996, 2). In *The Tattooed Girl* Joshua is supposed to be a great author, a literary genius, yet he struggles to keep up appearances and has difficulties in adjusting to the public perception of himself. He tries hard to maintain the image that others have of him. He is “a shy man, yet determined to seem gregarious in such settings” (*The Tattooed Girl* 32). His public image has become a role that is forced upon him: “There was Joshua Seigl's picture in the paper, a man trying to smile but looking trapped” (36).

Alma, on the other hand, is a violent anti-Semite, who hates Seigl because she hates all Jewish people. To Alma, Joshua is “the Other” in every way: male, rich, from a good family, highly educated. Joshua has no knowledge of any this antipathy on her part: he thinks Alma is a sweet girl who is genuinely trying to help him. In the meantime, she is lacing his food with shards of glass and loosening the screws on the railings in his home, in the hope that he would fall to his death. The other two characters also have multiple sides to them. Dmitri, Alma's abusive boyfriend, is a well-mannered waiter by day, and a drug addicted thief by night. Jet, Seigl's sister, has been a self-created character since childhood – “you never knew what was genuine, and what was invented” (115). My analysis will focus on Joshua and Alma, but the other two characters will also enter into the discussion.

The aim of this thesis is to examine how the different characters construct their identities, or how they are constructed for them. In what ways are the characters products of the society that surrounds them? What influences the way they think and act? How does other people's perception of them shape the way they see themselves, and in what ways are they able to invent their own identity? There are different levels of agency depicted in the novel. Jet has taken control of her own image in other people's eyes, even changing her name to better fit that image. Alma, on the other hand, is characterized by others. Her personality is secondary to her appearance: she is mostly described in terms of the way she looks, and even though people know her name, she is still often called simply the Tattooed Girl. A recurring theme in Oates' work is whether or not it is possible to escape your own history or the world in which you live. I will analyse how this theme manifests itself in this particular novel. Furthermore, I will examine the depictions of violence, as that is one feature in Oates' works that has been said to overshadow everything else. What is the connection between identity and violence? Is violence the result of conflicting “Others” or perhaps another way of constructing identity?

Due to the vastness of her literary output during the last fifty or so years, Oates has of course been the topic of many a scientific paper. There is, after all, plenty of source material for scholars to

study: to this day, she has written close to sixty novels, more than thirty collections of short stories, several volumes of poetry as well as numerous plays, essays and book reviews. She has also written nonfiction, ranging in themes from literary studies to boxing. There has not, however, been any significant research done on *The Tattooed Girl*, perhaps partly because of her extraordinary productivity – research has simply been focused on her other works. Especially her Pulitzer Prize nominated novels, *Black Water* (1992), *What I Lived For* (1994) and *Blonde* (2000), have been quite extensively studied, as have many of her short stories. Much of previous criticism has focused on the anger and violence in Oates' work. Especially feminist readings of some oppressed female characters in her novels has been the focus of much previous research. Therefore even though there is no research that has been done on *The Tattooed Girl*, there is an array of previous studies on Oates' work, some of which I will employ in this thesis.

My theoretical framework consists of cultural studies, psychoanalysis and metafiction, which all share the idea that identity is a construction. In cultural studies, I will make use of especially Stuart Hall's ideas of identity. According to him, identity is always in some ways a creation, a fiction, and different situations call for different identities (2005, 11). Identity is also formed in relation to “the Other”: I am not that, thus I am this. Or, in Hall's words, “all identity is constructed across difference” (1996b, 117). In addition to Hall and cultural studies, I will take a closer look at the characters' personal identity with the help of Jacques Lacan and psychoanalytic theory, with which I will examine the construction of identity under the gaze of the Other.

*The Tattooed Girl* is in many ways a novel about writing – as Joshua is an author, the act of writing plays an important part in the novel, and it is one the most significant aspects of the construction of his identity. There seem to be parallels drawn between inventing a story and inventing an identity. Therefore in section 4 I will also take the metafictional elements into account in my analysis. According to Patricia Waugh, it should be noted that although metafiction is most commonly associated with postmodernist literature, it is not exclusive to that paradigm (2001, 5). Therefore I feel justified in using some theory on metafiction even though *The Tattooed Girl* is not a

postmodernist novel. Waugh defines metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2001, 2). As metafiction exposes that our “reality” is only a construction, such “reality” can be seen as an impermanent structure that can be challenged. This theoretical framework is especially relevant in analysing Joshua, but I will also take a look at how this compares with the nearly illiterate Alma.

## **2 Theoretical frame**

In this section, I will discuss the role of the Other in the construction of identity. First I will approach this subject from the perspective of cultural studies. Stuart Hall argues that in order to define our own identity, we compare ourselves to the Other. Thus identity is formed in dialogue with the Other. In the context of *The Tattooed Girl*, the discussion of Otherness revolves around Jewishness in particular. In section 2.2 I will examine the Other through Jacques Lacan's theories. In his theory on the construction of a subject, visibility has an important role. The Other is the one who is looking at us. We are constantly aware of our own visibility, of the fact we are visible beings which means that at any given moment, someone *might* see us. Therefore the self is formed in relation to others: the ways in which we *think* others perceive are crucial in the way we see ourselves. Finally, in section 2.3 I will investigate the connection between identity and violence. Violence can be seen as a consequence of the divide between us and them, I and the Other, because this kind of division inevitably leads to frustration and discontent. Thus violence is a way for people who feel threatened in some way to assert themselves. Violence in an American context is also discussed, as is its role in the construction of American national identity.

### **2.1 Cultural studies: dialogue with the Other**

Different fields of study use the term identity to refer to slightly different things. In psychology it usually refers to personal identity, whereas in social studies its usual meaning is social identity. Stuart Hall distinguishes three views of identity from each other. Firstly, there is the Enlightenment subject, which was based on the idea that a person has an essential centre of the self. This centre was a person's identity, which “first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same [...] throughout the individual's existence” (1996a, 587). Therefore identity was not constructed, but instead a fixed entity. The idea of the Enlightenment subject was

heavily influenced by René Descartes' famous conclusion that *I think, therefore I am*. There was one thing that was certain to exist, and that was a thinking subject.

An opposing view for this rather individualistic conception of identity is the sociological subject, which rejects the idea of the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the subject. Instead, “identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society” (ibid). A person still has an essential centre, but outside influences form and modify this inner core or “the real me” (ibid). Simon Frith argues that identity “is both a performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social” (1996, 109). He also notes that instead of identity being something that someone can reveal or discover already implanted inside themselves, it instead comes from the outside (ibid). Compared to the Enlightenment subject, the sociological view of identity is therefore more interactive.

Thirdly, Hall discusses the idea of the postmodern subject, which is fragmented instead of being stable and unified. It consists of several different identities, which may sometimes conflict with each other. According to Hall, these contradictory identities “are not unified around a coherent 'self', but they are instead constantly pulling in opposite directions (1996a, 598). Because we assume different identities depending on the situation, our identifications fluctuate continuously (ibid). Therefore a unified identity is essentially a lie: “If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves” (ibid). Identities are thus continuously constructed, and that construction is never finished, because “[i]dentity is not a thing but a process – an experimental process” (Frith 1996, 110).

As a cultural theorist and sociologist, Hall's own focus is naturally on the sociological identity. According to Hall, “[i]dentity is an invention”, constructed in a dialogue between an individual and surrounding culture (1996b, 115). It comes into being “at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture” (ibid). In “Minimal Selves,” Hall uses his own experiences as a Jamaican immigrant in Britain to discuss his

ideas of identity. Although he left his native country and moved to a different continent altogether, he was not able to entirely forget about his old identity, his past, and relatives: “In relation to them, and then to all the other symbolic 'others,' I certainly was always aware of the self as only constituted in that kind of absent-present contestation with something else, with some other 'real me,' which is and isn't there” (1996b, 116). He continues:

If you live, as I've lived, in Jamaica, in a lower-middle-class family that was trying to be a middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an upper-middle-class Jamaican family trying to be an English Victorian family... I mean the notion of displacement as a place of “identity” is a concept you learn to live with, long before you are able to spell it. Living with, living through difference. (ibid)

Hall discounts any notion of a stable identity. Instead, we define ourselves in comparison to others. Forming an identity used to be considered quite a straightforward process – an identity was something that was simply there waiting to be found: “It has long been thought that this is really a simple process: a recognition – a resolution of irresolutions, a coming to rest in some place which was always there waiting for one. The 'real me' at last!” (1996b, 116) However, identities are not something that inherently exist. In fact, Judith Butler argues that all identities, including gender identities, are “a kind of impersonation and approximation [...] a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (1993, 313).

Identities are not simple, unified, clear categories in which people can easily place themselves. Hall uses black identity as an example: “The fact is 'black' has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found.” (ibid) You cannot talk about a singular “black identity” because for different people it means different things. A Jamaican experience of black identity is necessarily different from that of an African one. Not only are identities fictions, but so are the groups with which people are supposed to identify themselves. “It may be true that the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of 'closures' which are required to create communities of identification – nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc. – are arbitrary closures.” (1996b, 117)

Indian-born economist Amartya Sen has also discussed social identities, but unlike Hall, he does not take much issue with the arbitrary nature of the communities we identify with. Instead, he opposes the simplified view that people only have one social identity at the same time which trumps all others. Sen offers the opinion that people are always members of several communities simultaneously, none of which can be seen as their one and only identity (2009, 11). A person can be a citizen of the United States, originally Caribbean, of African descent, Christian, liberal, female, vegetarian, and so on, without there being any conflict. We are concurrently part of several different groups, be they national, religious or recreational. According to Sen, we are forced to choose which of these connections and identities are the most important in a given context (ibid).

Sen is thus an avid proponent of the idea that people are free to choose their own identity, although not altogether without limits: a Finnish teenager cannot assume the identity of an elderly Native American, for example. This does not mean that there is no freedom to choose one's identity, just that there are some obvious limitations to that freedom. Sen does, however, acknowledge the fact that even though we can control what we identify with and the way we see ourselves, we cannot control how we are perceived by others (2009, 29). Sometimes other people's definition of us differs from our own, and we may not even be aware of what that definition is. He discusses Jewishness as an example, and refers to Jean-Paul Sartre, who said that "it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew" (Sartre 1970, 143). Can it, then, really be said that we can shape our own identity if we have no control of the way others identify us with? I will examine the disparity between self-description and public perception in section 3.1 in relation to Joshua, who is only Jewish because other people perceive him as one.

Sen (2009, 15) sees simplification of identity as one reason for international violence and terrorism. If we are only seen as having one identity, for example national or religious identity, this may result in violence. Choosing a single social identity is similar to choosing an alliance. The common features between people are forgotten when the focus is on creating an "us and them" situation. Hate is cultivated into an unstoppable force, which drowns out all the connections that we

may have in common. In *The Tattooed Girl*, this takes the form of anti-Semitism. The characters in the novel actually have several features that they share: for example, they are American, they speak English, and they could also all be called white. After all, Joe W. Trotter points out that ever since Jewish people began immigrating from Europe to the United States, they not only perceived themselves as white but were also considered such by the majority culture (2004, 92). However, instead of the characters viewing these similarities as a unifying force, they see each other through their differences. For example, not much is known about Alma's murky past, but at least we know what she is not: Jewish.

Hall points out that “difference” can be both positive and negative. It is necessary for the production of social identities and a subjective sense of the self, but it is also “threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the Other” (1997, 238). Terry Eagleton, however, has argued that the similarities between all human beings are precisely the reason why there are so many conflicts, because “[o]nly someone with whom you can communicate can affirm their difference from you. Only within some kind of common framework is conflict possible.” (2004, 159) He continues that “the shared human nature which makes for murderous contention, however, also makes for solidarity” (ibid). After all, there is one crucial similarity between all human beings, and that is the body:

Eradicating differences is a violent business, and those whose identities are imperilled by it tend to respond in much the same bloodstained coin. Genuine kinds of universality, however, understand that difference belongs to our common nature. It is not the opposite of it. The body may be the fundamental way that we belong to each other, but it is also the way in which we are uniquely individuated. To encounter another human body is thus to encounter, indissociably, both sameness and difference. The body of the other is at once strange and familiar. It is exactly the fact that we can relate to it which highlights its otherness. (2004, 161)

## **2.2. Psychoanalysis: the gaze of the Other**

According to Jacques Lacan (2001, 1–5), children first recognise themselves as separate subjects during what he calls “the mirror stage”, which in turn consists of three stages of self-recognition. When children first see themselves in the mirror, they mistake their own reflection with that of their

mother. They then realize that the reflection in the mirror is merely an image instead of a real being. At the final stage, the children understand that the image reflected in the mirror is their own, and are able to make a distinction between themselves and others. Madan Sarup explains that in the mirror stage “the subject arrives at an apprehension of both its self and the Other – indeed of itself as Other” (1988, 27). Therefore subjectivity is relational: “it only comes into play through the principle of difference, by the opposition of the 'other' or the 'you' to the 'I'” (1988, 29).

Because of the mirror stage, the subject has to continuously search for unity. A crucial difference between the theories of Hall and Lacan is that whereas Hall denied the possibility of forming an identity by self-recognition, Lacan suggests that self-recognition does occur, but that it is actually mis-recognition:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development. (2001, 3)

In other words, the subject recognises itself in the mirror, but does so through self-alienation: I am that which is there. Lacan calls this self-recognition *méconnaissance* (mis-recognition). As Sarup explains it, the mirror stage is “a moment of alienation, since to know oneself through an external image is to be defined through self-alienation” (1988, 27). Therefore the subject's relationship to its own reflection is deeply conflicted: on one hand, the mirror supplies it with a coherent identity, which the subject loves. On the other hand, it simultaneously hates that image, since the image stays external to it (ibid).

As self-recognition actually happens from the outside, “from the place of the other” (Lacan, quoted by Hall 1997, 237), the Other has a vital role in the constitution of the self. It is the reason why the child is able to recognise itself as a unified subject. The “wholeness” and unity of the self is formed in relation to others. In other words, because identity is not a cohesive whole, it is filled from the “outside” with the ways in which we think *others* see us. The subject formed in the mirror stage is later “objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other” (Lacan 2001, 2), or, as

Sarup expresses it, we acquire knowledge of ourselves from the way others react to us (1988, 14). What is important in Lacan's theory of identity is that it is never possible to achieve a stable image: "There is always a gap, a misrecognition. [...] We have an idea of our identity but it does not correspond with reality; the mirror image is back to front." (1988, 15) Hall describes the psychoanalytic perspective of identity:

[T]here is no such thing as a given, stable inner core to "the self" or to identity. Psychically, we are never fully unified as subjects. Our subjectivities are formed through this troubled, never-completed, unconscious dialogue with the internalization of – the "Other". It is formed in relation to something which completes us but which – since it lies outside us – we in some ways always lack. (1997, 238)

Thus the whole idea of identity is based on the gaze of the Other, as that is the only way the subject can become aware of itself. Janne Seppänen (2004, 112) writes that while the presence of the Other is necessary, it is also tragic because our whole existence therefore depends on being the object of the other. We become slaves to the gaze of the Other and our existence is limited. There is a constant awareness that the freedom of the Other is greater than ours. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, this causes a feeling of shame, because we become aware that we are constantly under the evaluating scrutiny of the Other: "I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as [...] an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. [...] Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me." (1969, 222)

It should be emphasized that the gaze of the Other is an impersonal, anonymous one. It is not necessarily a matter of someone actually seeing us, but the knowledge that we are visible beings and thus there is always a possibility that we *could* be seen. Because of this, we shape our appearance to fit the image that we want other people to have of us, and this, in turn, depends on the surrounding culture and its values and ideals. (Seppänen 2004, 166) According to Seppänen, what we see and how we appear are connected.

Sarup summarizes Lacan's view of the connection between identity and the Other:

Lacan stresses the point that there is no subject except in representation, but that no representation captures us completely. I can neither be totally defined nor can I escape all definition. I am the quest for myself. Lacan believes that how we present ourselves is always subject to interpretation by others. On the other hand, any attempt to 'totalize'

someone else, to grasp the other completely, is bound to fall short – no description does the other justice. Moreover, one can only see oneself as one *thinks* others see one. (1988, 15–16)

I will return to Lacan and the gaze of the Other in section 3.2, where I will analyse Alma's identity partly by way of Lacan's theory of the role of the Other in forming one's identity. My argument is that she, more than anyone else in the novel, is a product of the gaze of the Other.

### **2.3 Identity and violence**

Violence is an unavoidable part of human society. Robert Ardrey even argues that personal violence is deeply ingrained in human nature as “[i]t is perfectly natural for a man to get mad at his wife and hit her over the head and kill her, or vice versa. We have always been dangerous animals.” (Klineberg 1981, 113) However, this does not explain why only a minority of people actually ever resort to violence. Therefore it would in fact be more accurate to say that although we have been provided with the capacity for violence, whether and how it is exercised is determined by social circumstance (Klineberg 1981, 114).

Klineberg lists several factors which give rise to violence. He draws special attention to the so-called frustration-aggression hypothesis, according to which aggression always originates from frustration, and frustration always results in aggression (1981, 116). An important concept is that of reference group, which is a group we identify with or wish to join, or with which we compare ourselves. In *The Tattooed Girl*, Dmitri and Alma belong to the same reference group. Their hatred and aggression towards Joshua is not only linked to ethnicity but also social imbalance and economic frustration. Alma's already negative views are amplified by her desire to impress Dmitri and find similarities between them.

However, violence is not merely a result of frustration caused by factors such as unequal political power, but it is also a way of defining one's identity. J. Samuel Kirubahar (2011, 114) argues that the violence in Oates' works has precisely this purpose: it can be a way for a person to gain a sense of identity and wholeness. Violence “becomes the agency of self-discovery and self-

affirmation” (ibid). Therefore the violence in her works serves many functions from the characters' perspective, as it is both a reaction to surrounding society and the frustration it causes to an individual, as well as a way for said individual to construct their own identity. Kirubahar discounts the notion expressed by some critics that the violence in Oates' works is in some ways unnecessary or even sensational:

Her violence is not a programmatic resolution to every situation [...]. It is not her handy way of resolving crisis. It is a natural outlet or course of action. Her characters fall back on violence when they are confronted with threats to their self-image or with the exposure of their impotence. Violence in Oates is not the *deus ex machina* of an artist who cannot write herself out of critical situations. Her novels are so satiated with violence. Violence in her works is a reflection of the violence in society. (2011, 112)

The connection between identity and violence is particularly relevant in an American context, although not exclusive to it. After all, why should the United States be any more violent than other nations? Similar tendencies can be found whenever there is a situation where one side has considerably more power than the other, for example the creation of the British Commonwealth, or the Spanish and Portuguese invasions of areas of South America. Still, Barry R. Schaller asserts that the fact that some form of violence has always been a notable aspect of American life is a commentary on American society (1997, 56). He supports historian Richard Hofstadter's argument that despite America having a *history* of violence, it does not have a *tradition* of violence (ibid). Although violence has been both frequent and common throughout American history, it has had “neither an ideological nor a geographical center”, and it has lacked uniformity and cohesion (1997, 57). Instead Schaller calls it unorganised, “a kind of *eclectic* violence” (ibid, emphasis in original).

Schaller argues that there is a cultural approval of violence in America, which he sees as the result of violence having been translated into symbolism or myth, which in turn have been used for political or other such purposes (1997, 60). According to Richard Slotkin, violence has played a considerable part in forming (white) American national identity. He begins his book *Regeneration through Violence* (1973) with a quote from D.H. Lawrence: “But you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet

melted.” Schaller also comments on the connection between violence and national identity, saying that violence has accompanied both negative and positive developments in American history, and therefore even though it may not be acknowledged as part of the American value system, it is nevertheless a distinct feature of American national identity (1997, 61).

National identity is something that holds society together, a feeling of belonging together as a nation and working towards a common goal. Slotkin notes that there is a continuous need to define or create a national identity, “a character for us to live in the world” (1973, 4). He examines American national identity by way of mythology, which is “the intelligible mask of that enigma called the 'national character'” (1973, 3). As I have already discussed, identity is a construction, a fiction, and this applies to national identity as well. Benedict Anderson has studied this topic in his famous book *Imagined Communities* (1983), in which he argues that a nation is a cultural construct, created by people who imagine themselves as part of said group. Slotkin focuses on the role of myths in shaping national identity, and argues that American identity is based on violence:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness – the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness [...]. (1973, 4)

The history of violence still has an effect: Slotkin argues that the world view and psychology of ancestors are transmitted through myths to people living today, and thus those violent tendencies are still found in today's society (1973, 3). The thought patterns are inherited through mythology. Slotkin goes on to explain some of the violence in today's society by saying that “myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living.” According to him, the “frontier psychology” still persists. (1973, 5)

### 3 Constructing identity

In this section, I will analyse how the idea that identity is constructed through Otherness manifests itself in *The Tattooed Girl*. The focus of section 3.1 is on Joshua, his perceived Jewishness and also disparity between his public and private identities. In many ways, his identity is not so much a question of what he himself wishes to identify with, but instead a way for the other characters around him to build their own identities in relation to him. Section 3.2 focuses on Alma and the way her identity is the result of the gaze of the Other. Others see her as the Tattooed Girl, and therefore she sees herself as that. I will also analyse what kinds of metaphors and similes are used to describe her appearance, and what these descriptions reveal about not only how others see her but also how she sees herself. In section 3.3 I will deal with the violence that occurs when these worlds of others collide. The novel is filled with binary oppositions in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, which create unavoidable tensions between the characters. However, it is not only a simple matter of these tensions reaching a breaking point, but my argument is that violence is actually used in the construction of identity, as well.

#### 3.1 Joshua – “a man trying to smile but looking trapped”

As Stuart Hall has argued, identity is interactive, created as a dialogue between the self and society (1996a, 587). In *The Tattooed Girl*, there is a considerable discrepancy between what Joshua believes he is and what others think or want him to be. If identity is indeed a dialogue, then in Joshua's case society is certainly more vocal about it than he is himself. Unlike Jet, for example, he does not take an active role in defining who he is. In fact, his passivity in this respect facilitates other people's apparent mission to define him.

He is trapped in other people's preconceived notions of what he is, firstly due to his role in the public eye. As a member of a wealthy family, he has taken part in various pursuits in charity, such as donating a new wing for the local children's hospital and funding an art museum. In addition to

his fame due to his background, he is the well respected author of a successful novel as well as a university lecturer. Thereby he has created an image for himself as an intellectual philanthropist, which is an image he now struggles to maintain. A significant aspect of his public persona is also that he is seen as a representative of Jewishness in America, although he has done nothing to encourage this view. However, as his family background is largely Jewish and his novel dealt with the Holocaust, he is viewed as a Jewish author. This generates certain expectations in terms of what he should be and how he should act. It also causes the people around him to react in various ways towards him. Dmitri and Alma despise him because they think he is Jewish, whereas his sister Jet does not believe he is Jewish enough. For Joshua, however, his Jewishness or lack thereof is of little importance, whereas the other characters see it as his defining feature. What should be a matter of Joshua's own personal identity is instead a way for the others to define themselves.

In this section, I will firstly discuss Joshua in connection with Jewishness. Joshua and his perceived Jewishness function as the Other for Dmitri and Alma, something that they can use to construct their own identities. Joshua is that which they are not. For Jet, however, it is important that her brother is Jewish so that her own Jewish identity is on more stable ground. In the second part of this section, I will analyse Joshua as a member of the Seigl family and examine to what extent his family history is a burden for him.

### **3.1.1 “Jews! More Jews”: Jewish Otherness**

Stuart Hall has argued that black identity is “a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found.” (1996b, 116) Similarly Jewish identity is a construction, created by Jewish people themselves. From another point of view, it is also constructed by non-Jewish people, who perceive Jewishness as the Other, as in *they are something that we are not*. Before further delving into matters concerning Jewish identity, a definition of Jewishness is needed.

Jewishness is not a straightforward term, and it has been widely debated whether the essence of it is a shared religion, ethnicity or something else entirely. In this thesis, I use the term

“Jewishness” instead of “Judaism” in order to show that in *The Tattooed Girl* religion has very little to do with what makes a person Jewish. Nancy Foner (2004, 4) has summed up the problematic nature of Jewishness with the following questions:

To what extent does Jewish ethnicity depend on Judaism, and to what extent does it depend on having Jewish ancestors? Does a Gentile convert become Jewish in an ethnic as well as a religious sense? Does a person who was born a Jew and becomes non-religious or converts to another religion cease to be a Jew?

According to Victoria Hattam, for many Jewish people religious belief is not the only thing that makes them a distinct group (2004, 45). Instead, some feel there is a shared Jewish “culture”, which could be condensed to a notion of group consciousness and shared social practices that the terms religion, race or nation cannot fully cover (ibid). Hattam also refers to Isaac B. Berkson, who viewed ethnicity as a social identity instead of a heritable one (2004, 50). Hattam continues that ethnic groups, for Berkson, “are not self-producing but must be sustained through cultural institutions whose task it is to cultivate a sense of self-conscious identity and history for the group” (ibid). What makes a group Jewish is their shared identification as members of that group. Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, emphasized the role of the Other in defining Jewish identity:

What is it, then, that serves to keep a semblance of unity in the Jewish community? [...] It is neither their past, their religion, nor their soil that unites the sons of Israel. If they have a common bond, if all of them deserve the name of Jew, it is because they have in common the situation of a Jew, that is, they live in a community which takes them for Jews. (1970, 67)

Sartre's view takes away any possibility of personal choice in whether or not a person is Jewish. In other words, he believes Jewishness is not a matter of self-perception. Instead, it is the Other that defines someone as Jewish.

The question of what it means to be Jewish has come up in Oates' fiction before, for example in her novel *Blonde*. One of the characters in the novel is Jewish playwright Arthur Miller, who perceives his Jewishness in precisely the way Sartre defined it, as an identity that is given to him by others. Lotta Kähkönen summarizes Miller's definition of Jewishness as “primarily about culture, not necessarily about religion or a shared, traumatic history of the Holocaust” (2009a, 298). Being Jewish is not the single most important aspect of his identity, and he “experiences Jewish identity as

a fixed entity especially when other people stigmatize him as a Jew” (ibid). Jewishness has historically been something that has not necessarily been a question of what people actually identify themselves as, but how other people perceive them, which, of course, culminated during the Nazi reign. Because of this, people have made deliberate efforts to hide their own identity, which is also mentioned in *The Tattooed Girl*: “Seigl's great-grandfather had reputedly married into the Munich-Catholic haute bourgeoisie with the understanding that this act would make of him and his progeny non-Jews in perpetuity” (53). As Joshua's great-grandfather lived in Germany around the time of National socialism, it is safe to assume that this was mostly a survival tactic rather than a desire to re-define himself. However, the point remains that his plan did not work, and he was still seen as Jewish no matter how he actually wanted to be perceived.

As mentioned earlier, Amartya Sen believes people can choose their own identity, within reason (2009, 29). He goes on to say that there is one aspect of choosing one's identity that is out of our own control and that is other people's perception of us. This is what happens with Joshua and Jewishness: Joshua is only Jewish because other people perceive him as such. Sartre has argued that “[t]he Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew” (1970, 69). Even though Joshua does not identify himself as Jewish, others do, and he is therefore forced into the role of the Other in the eyes of the people around him. Alma and Dmitri base their assumptions of his Jewishness on different things. Alma is baffled by his name, which she sees as a deliberate sign on his part that he considers himself Jewish: “why didn't such a person as Joshua Seigl change his name? Why would he wish to be mistaken for a Jew, except to deceive?” (260) Her reasoning is that Jewishness is something people hide unless they deliberately want to be associated with it. Dmitri, on the other hand, bases his assumption on general opinion, his knowledge on Joshua's family history, and the fact that he is familiar with Joshua's body of work, assuming he must be Jewish because why else would he have written about Jewish history.

It is pertinent to make the distinction between the terms “race” and “ethnicity,” since the characters seem to view Jewishness in those terms. Dmitri in particular talks explicitly about

Jewishness as a “race”: “When certain things happen to a race you have to wonder why, don't you?” (35) Diana Kendall notes that the term “race” has often historically been used to divide people into categories based on assumed “*genetic* variations in physical appearance” (2008, 274, emphasis in original). However, the meaningfulness of the concept of a biological race has been disputed by sociologists and biologists alike, who instead argue that “race is a *socially constructed reality*; not a biological one” (ibid, emphasis in original). The idea of people belonging to different races has been used to classify groups of people as either inferior or superior in relation to each other (ibid). The notion of Jewishness as a biological “race” was also what Nazi eugenics was based on. By that definition, Joshua would also have been called Jewish: “Of course, the Nazis would have classified me as Jewish. I'd have had to wear a yellow star. Maybe that's the kind of 'Jewish' you're thinking of? A Nazi-Jew?” (259) Instead of a “race,” Joshua views Jewishness as an ethnicity, which is based not only on ancestry but more importantly on shared cultural traits and traditions and a sense of community among a group of people. Therefore there is some room for personal choice on whether or not one identifies with a certain group or not. With Jewishness, there is the additional requirement that one must have a Jewish mother in order to be Jewish by birth, which Joshua (nor Jet) do not have: “My father was Jewish. Not my mother. I can't be Jewish then by birth. And I'm not Jewish by conversion.” (259) Therefore Joshua is not Jewish by blood nor personal choice. However, as has become evident, choice does not really matter when it comes to Joshua and Jewishness.

Despite the notion of “race” being a somewhat problematic one, it certainly helps to understand the interpersonal relations and therefore identities depicted in *The Tattooed Girl*. It serves to enhance the otherness that Alma in particular feels when it comes to Joshua. Joshua questions Alma on what she thinks a Jewish person is: “Do you personally believe, Alma, that Jews are somehow different from you and your family? Jews are – what? Exotic? Treacherous? Dangerous? Not to be trusted? Likely to swindle you? A separate and distinct race of the human being?” (258) Although he means his questions to be somewhat flippant in nature, not really

believing sweet Alma could think such things, he stumbles upon the truth as she sees it. There are certain stereotypes which Alma and Dmitri associate with Jewish people. These mistaken generalisations are the reason why they so despise Joshua, even though they realise he does not quite fit the stereotype. Whatever positive aspects of Joshua they are able to find, they are always coloured by what they think he is: “You had to admire the man whatever you thought of the race. And maybe the race wasn't all bad; Jews were benefactors of charities and libraries and things like that.” (36) It is not that Joshua is a particularly good person, he is simply not quite as loathsome as the stereotype suggests Jewish people usually are. However, because there is such a divide between the stereotype and reality Dmitri finds it fake: “The Jew left big tips, he was a big friendly guy, it went against what you were led to believe of the race but maybe that was the point. Some kind of play-acting.” (102) The phrase “led to believe” suggests someone has persuaded him to believe the racial stereotype. His hatred is based on supposition and perceived truths rather than personal experience. This is also the basis of Alma's distrust of Jewish people. She has been told to hate them:

A Jew is a despised thing her grandfather had said screwing up his burnt-looking face to spit, and Alma said, Why? and he said, Because they are accursed of God and man, and Alma said, Why? for sincerely she wished to know, and her grandfather said, vague but angry, Jews killed Christ. Judas killed Christ, he was a Jew. And so she would set her heart against the Jew though he had been kind to her and had not touched her. (101)

Sartre has claimed that “it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew” (1970, 143). He has a Marxist approach to what he calls the Jewish question, since he believes class differences are the main explanation for anti-Semitism. In fact, he calls anti-Semitism “a poor man's snobbery” (1970, 26). In his view, the lower classes are more prone to despising Jewish people, because they believe Jewish people have taken from them what should be theirs. In other words, they use hatred against Jews to explain the unfairness of the world. The connection that Sartre claims exists between anti-Semitism and class differences does actually present itself to some extent in *The Tattooed Girl*, since Joshua is rich and Dmitri and Alma are anything but. They resent his wealth and his high position on the social ladder: “Seigl wasn't the type to betray curiosity, though. Too canny. His

social class, living on the Hill. Jew snobs. Looking down their Jew noses at slut white trash.” (41) At that point, Joshua has done nothing to suggest arrogance or class consciousness on his part, but it is instead Dmitri's inference. Joshua is rich, he is Jewish, therefore he must also be a snob and look down on the lower classes.

There is therefore an undeniable element of class difference in the novel, as is often the case with Oates' work. One example of similar social structures is in the novel *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart*, which Kähkönen has studied with focus on white women and class. She (2009b, 24) notes that in Oates' texts, the characters that are referred to as white trash often have the distinctive characteristic of feeling misplaced, due to being forced to move away from their place of origin. This is also the case with Alma, who has moved to Carmel Heights from rural Pennsylvania. She is explicitly referred to as white trash several times, and is therefore seen as less than others. In the affluent Carmel Heights, her lowly standing on the social ladder is even more noticeable. Although she is able to physically move, she is socially immobile. She is part of the long narrative about white trash in America. Anthony Harkins writes that the label “white trash” refers to white people who deal with “economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment” (2003, 5). In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these people were even considered “a separate 'race' in, but not of, white America” (ibid). They were viewed as genetically inferior, “neither truly 'white' nor clearly 'nonwhite' but instead, a separate 'Cracker' race in all ways so debased that they had no capacity for social advancement” (2003, 17). Studies on racial hygiene, eugenics, conducted at the time aimed to show their genetic degeneration. Much like with Jewish people, attempts were made to explain the marginalization of these poor whites by way of biological “facts.” They were a lower form of white, and therefore a threat to the white race. They were “a white 'other,' a construction both within and beyond the confines of American 'whiteness’” (2003, 4).

According to Harkins, contempt for the so-called white trash was equally strong among both African Americans and rich whites, and “[t]he construction of a 'poor white' and 'white trash' social and cultural category [...] allowed black slaves to carve out a space of social superiority” (ibid).

Similarly Dmitri and Alma emphasize Joshua's Jewishness in order to feel in some way socially superior. They use his Jewishness as a means to construct their own whiteness. Even though they may be thought of as white trash, in comparison to the Jew, they feel they are still better because they at least are white. According to Sartre, "treating the Jew as an inferior and pernicious being" makes it possible for poor people to feel they are part of the elite (1970, 27). Their hatred towards a common Other also connects them and makes them a part of a bigger collective. Therefore they create a feeling of group identity by way of the Other.

This might also be one reason why Jet so desperately wants to be Jewish: to achieve a sense of belonging. After all, as Sartre says, "[i]n effect, the Jew is to another Jew the only man with whom he can say 'we.'" (1970, 101) Even though there might in some respects be greater prejudice towards her, she would be part of something bigger. In addition, there would always be a chance that someone sees her as Jewish anyway, even if she had continued being just plain old Mary Beth. Therefore before anyone else has the chance to categorize her, she does so herself. Denise Riley writes (2000, 10-11) about this pre-emptive response: "if one is always going to be called a such-and-such from the outside, one might as well get in first, to deflect the imposition by putting up one's own account of oneself like an umbrella against a hard rain of attributes." Therefore self-naming is an act of taking control of one's own identity, because one is able to define oneself before others have a chance to do so. I will discuss self-naming in more detail in section 4.3.

Sartre argues that the hatred that Jewish people have been subjected to is the very thing that keeps them together and gives them a sense of community: "the Jews have neither community of interests nor community of beliefs. They do not have the same fatherland; they have no history. The sole tie that binds them is the hostility and disdain of the societies which surround them." (1970, 91) In the face of the vitriol aimed at them, there is safety in numbers. Foner (2004, 5) offers the view that perhaps instead of ethnicity as a connecting thread, some communities such as Jews might depend on "a simple willingness to share the culture and embrace vicariously the collective memories of the group" and that "[t]he performance of ethnicity as a group culture may be at least

as important as real or imagined 'blood ties' with the other members of the group.” Therefore Jewishness is Jet's way of building her identity, of achieving a stable self. Joshua's unwillingness to play along with her threatens her own identity, because how can she be Jewish if her brother is not. Riley writes: “My self-description may well be my self-fantasy. Perhaps each and every act of identification is fantastical.” (2000, 13) She continues that “[t]o be in fantasy is to live 'as if'. Some scene is being played out; and any act of identification necessarily entails a scenario.” (ibid) Joshua's resistance therefore disrupts Jet's identity. She has created a version of reality in which she is Jewish, which in turn depends on his brother fitting the role that she has planned for him. However, Joshua is not living to his full potential as an author nor as a Jewish person:

From the deranged sister's perspective it meant that he, Joshua, was a hater of Jews, because, from the deranged sister's perspective, he had failed to 'live up to the promise' of *The Shadows*. Yet it meant, too, obviously, that Jet was the Jew who 'hated' her brother who was insufficiently Jewish, in her eyes. (240)

Unlike Jet, Joshua is suspicious of any notions of collective identities in principle, which is also evidenced by the various discussions on witchcraft: “there were those who were perceived to be witches, and those who so perceived themselves” (79). Other people thought they were witches, they themselves thought they were witches, yet they never were. It was all “a collective delusion” (78), a mistaken identity.

### **3.1.2 “For the sake of the family”: the burden of history**

It is not only forced Jewishness that Joshua is fighting against. There is another identity which is being thrust upon him whether he likes it or not: that of a Seigl. He is a member of a well-known family, and is therefore expected to act in a certain manner in order to maintain the good name of the family. The idea of his heritage repulses him, as it suggests he owes something to someone. This repulsion shows itself for example when he meets Essler, a third-year Ph.D. candidate who interviews for the position of Joshua's assistant. Essler talks about his own realisation of his Jewishness: “You see, I was only just becoming aware of the Holocaust, about which my parents had never spoken, and my – heritage.' (Heritage! Seigl grimaced.)” (11) Therefore another question

pertaining to him is the importance of history in terms of his life and his identity. Is he allowed to be whatever and whoever he wants to be or is he indebted to his background?

Indeed, much importance is placed on history in the novel, as it is evident in the everyday life of the characters. Alma, for example, left her home town but is still carrying the results of her past, literally in the form of the tattoos, as well as the psychological scars of her past abuse. There is no escape for her. Joshua, on the other hand, tries to ignore the influence of his past, not wanting to be just a continuation of his family. *"I am not my ancestors* Seigl thought desperately. *I am not my father, I am scarcely myself."* (49) In fact, his whole identity is based on things or attributes that he is not. Others perceive him as Jewish, he does not. Others perceive him as a continuation of the Seigl family, he does not. Others perceive him as a successful author, yet he has only written one novel and that was years earlier. Even his sense of national identity is somewhat in question: "He was European by temperament, not American. And, though he'd been a novelist once, and believed he would be again, by nature Seigl was a philosopher: philosophers hate history." (49) There are many things he is not, yet few things he is.

Perhaps one reason Joshua so resents his role in society is that so little of his social standing is due to his own actions. Inevitably connected with the notion of the American Dream is also the idea of the self-made man. In terms of his wealth, Joshua is largely not that. Even though he has made a comfortable career for himself in the literary world and the academia, he inherited the money from his parents. Nowhere is this more evident than in the opulence of his home:

This property in the city's most distinguished old residential neighborhood was one Seigl had inherited, not one he'd sought; coming into its possession, he'd simply moved into a few of the furnished rooms as a squatter might have done, and left the others unexplored. (16)

The fact that he is comparing himself to a squatter suggests his unease about the situation. He does not feel at home and actually feels he does not have real claim over the estate. There are also hints that suggest he thinks his life has been scripted in advance: "Jet, you'll have to write your own morbid history. I'm trying to get out from under my own." (120) Yet it seems he is either unable or even unwilling to do so. He says he is trying to get out from under his destiny, but does not actually

seem very active in this endeavour. Even when he hurts his leg, he does not buy a cane, instead “rummaging through a closet in his house he'd found this specimen, very likely a cane used by his Steadman grandfather” (67). It seems a metaphor of him carrying his past with him, both as a burden and a support.

Joshua's attitude towards his past is in stark contrast to that of Jet's, who tells him that “[y]ou can't 'get out from under' your destiny” (120). Her deterministic attitude towards life is somewhat surprising, bearing in mind she is the one who has effectively reinvented herself, going from Mary Beth to Jetimah. On one hand she says “I do what I want to do, Josh. What I want to do I do. Try it.” (118) However, to Joshua she says that “[e]verything pre-exists in our genes which we inherit at conception. All that we are destined.” (123) This curious contradiction shows that for Jet, everything is possible, whereas Joshua should accept his role. This is because Jet has created the story of her life around her brother:

My destiny is a simple one: to aid you in fulfilling your destiny. We can collaborate. Of course, my name wouldn't appear on any book of yours. My dream is a sequel to *The Shadows* bringing the story of the survivors – and their children – into this new century. Looking forward as well as back. We owe it to the memory of our father and his people, and to ourselves. We are all Holocaust survivors. (119)

The past is constantly present in the form of shadows, which are a recurring motif in the novel. Most notably, *The Shadows* is the name of Joshua's only novel, of which there are various editions scattered all over his home. They act as a reminder of what he once was able to produce, whereas now he struggles to create anything new. The shadows are a metaphor of Joshua's past: one cannot detach oneself from one's shadow, just like one cannot simply forget about one's past. Jet is a regressive force in Joshua's life who is trying to prevent change and bring back the past. Indeed, at the end of the novel when Jet attacks Alma, she is referred to as “a shadow-figure” (305).

Susan Allen Ford has noted that “[a] pervasive theme in Oates's fiction is the construction by the self of a personality – or at least a persona – to control the chaos within. [...] Oates's protagonists systematically harden themselves to deal with the assaults of the world on their naked selves.” (2001, 307) To some extent, this would seem to be true of the characters in *The Tattooed*

*Girl* as well. There is certainly a fair amount of play-acting by many of the characters. They are constantly aware that they and their actions are seen and judged by others, and this awareness makes it possible for them to build a persona which they then allow others to see instead of the real them. There are different reasons for this play-acting. For Dmitri this is a practical issue: in order to do his job properly, he has to play his part. Erving Goffman, who has studied the ways in which people present themselves to others in everyday life, wrote that people sometimes behave in an entirely calculating way, expressing themselves in a certain manner simply in order to evoke from them a specific response they wish to obtain (1956, 3). Dmitri plays the role of the dutiful waiter, even though he is actually seething inside and loathes the people he has to serve. “Waiters are primed to such duplicities.” (40)

However, Dmitri's pretending is nothing compared to that of Jet. For Dmitri, his professional identity is simply a temporary role he assumes out of necessity. For Jet, though, the role she takes becomes her identity. Therefore the notion of the performativity of identity is useful here. The term performative originally derives from J. L. Austin's views on speech act theory, according to which language not only describes reality but also affects it: in certain situations, saying something is doing something. Judith Butler takes the idea of the performative nature of language and applies it to the construction of identity. She focuses on gender identity, saying that gender is “*performative* in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (1993, 314, emphasis in original) Applied to other identities as well, this then means that action is not a representation of identity, but instead action creates identity. Therefore, according to this view, the subject has an active role in the construction of identity: acting like something is being something.

Jet takes on a pretend identity and does not even really try to hide the fact, nor is she in the least apologetic about it. She even admits out loud that she is careful about how she appears to others: “I can't drink alone. I can't even give the appearance of drinking alone.” (127) One aspect of her assumed identity is the way she chooses to look. “Her appearance suggested a costume, selected with care: layers of fine dark wool cashmere, kidskin gloves and shoes with spike heels that looked,

to Seigl's uneasy male eye, dangerous as hooves.” (114) Her way of being is so dependent on others that she needs to project her identity clearly to others:

For Seigl hadn't been able to grieve much for his parents. Not as you'd expect a normal son to grieve. Nor was he a hypocrite, to have pretended. While Jet, formerly Mary Beth, who'd caused both their parents heartbreak, was devastated by their father's death; a showy sort of grief that had involved a brief hospitalization and prolonged visits with relatives, yet, Seigl was inclined to think, sincere enough. For even narcissists grieve: perhaps narcissists grieve most profoundly, losing those who'd existed to love them and to mirror their exaggerated sense of self-worth. (108–109)

As with Dmitri suspecting Joshua of some kind of play-acting because he behaves against the Jewish stereotype, so Joshua questions his sister's authenticity. “Seigl had his doubts: he'd always believed that Jet was far too intelligent to mean much of what she said, but might be testing the limits of others' credulity. Playacting at exaggeration, hysteria. But a face can take on the contours of the mask pressed against it.” (115)

With Joshua more than with any other character the idea of keeping up appearances presents itself. It is, of course, not unusual to behave differently in different situations. However, as a known figure, Joshua also has an image, which means that people expect him to be a certain kind. He has an idea of what he should be, so he tries to fill that role. This role becomes particularly transparent when he falls during a morning run: “Yet his first reaction was embarrassment, that someone might have seen Joshua Seigl take a clumsy fall.” (47) Even though this happens early morning at a cemetery with no one else in sight, his first thought is what other people might think about him in that moment. The choice of using his whole name reveals that he is not actually worried what people might think about him as a person, but of “Joshua Seigl”, the public figure. Joshua in private is one thing, Joshua at The Café playing chess with his acquaintances is something else, Joshua at a social function representing the Seigl family is something else still. There is not much else for him to do but accept his role. “There was Joshua Seigl's picture in the paper, a man trying to smile but looking trapped.” (36)

Yet even more than Joshua himself, Jet is concerned with how others see him. She has an opinion of what Joshua is and also the will to shape that image. “I want to see everything. I intend

to be Joshua Seigl's literary executor, pre-posthumous.” (126) Again, like with the Jewishness, Jet wants Joshua to fit into a role of her choice, in this instance that of Joshua Seigl, the literary institution. She is already preserving the image of Joshua the author, therefore also Joshua as a member of the Seigl family. As Joshua's image affects the image of the Seigl family, it also influences how Jet herself is perceived. This is also why she is so enraged that Joshua has hired Alma as his assistant. Not only has Alma taken the place in Joshua's life that Jet had thought was hers, but she is also not good enough to assist the great Joshua Seigl:

She hardly appears literate, let alone literary. Just now I tried to engage her in conversation, I was scrupulously polite to her, and she blushed and gaped at me like an idiot. You're trusting your papers and manuscripts to an idiot. She speaks some sort of sub-English. She mumbles and wipes her nose on her hand. That tattoo on her face is grotesque. I wouldn't doubt she is a Ukrainian peasant, or she's been airlifted from Bosnia, Albania. I hope to God you're not having her answer your phone, Joshua. Everyone must be laughing at you. (137)

She is less than thrilled with Joshua not writing original fiction instead of translating classics. Again, he does not fit the role she has in mind for him. He should be writing about the Jewish experience, her family's history, and by doing so in effect creating her own story in the process. “And you, hiding in here, translating Virgil! *Virgil* was pronounced like *Alma*, with infinite scorn.” (138, emphasis in original) As I argued earlier in connection with Jewishness, Jet relies on her brother in the construction of her own identity. For all her insistence that she does whatever she wants to do and is whatever she wants to be, her brother has a crucial role in that. “You're deeply into denial, Joshua. Your career is in tatters and you don't seem to care. This 'autoimmune' condition: it's your own self turning against you. But in destroying yourself you're destroying others, too. The memory of our family. Our heritage.” (138)

If identity is constructed in dialogue with the Other, then in Joshua's case the Other has much more to say than he does. His identity seems to be considerably more problematic to the people around him than it is to him. He does not assume any particular identity, yet is constantly bombarded with the ways others perceive him, because they use him in the construction of their own identities. For Dmitri and Alma, he is the Other that they compare themselves with. In particular, they

construct their own whiteness in comparison to the Jew, which is a response to the social impotence they feel. Jet, on the other hand, needs Joshua to assume a Jewish identity so that her own would be more solid. For all her claims of independence, she needs Joshua to corroborate the story she has devised. However, he is aware of this and therefore able to refute the identities that people try to force upon him. In the next section I will focus on Alma, who is not nearly as successful in opposing the Other.

### **3.2 Alma – “the Tattooed Girl with no last name”**

In this section, I will analyse Alma and the construction of her identity under the gaze of the Other. In the previous section, I approached the idea of identity from the perspective of cultural studies. There the Other was mostly used as a point of comparison, as a way against which the characters constructed themselves. However, in this section the Other has a much more fundamental function, as I will argue that it is the Other that actually constructs Alma. There are many ways in which others attempt to mould Joshua to fit their idea of him, but he has a solid enough perception of himself to refute the most outlandish claims. However, that is not the case with Alma. More than any other character in the novel, she relies on other people's perception of her in order to form her own idea of herself. To others, she is more an assemblage of body parts instead of an actual person with thoughts and feelings. Her body and appearance are described endlessly to the exclusion of all other attributes. I will begin this section by analysing the ways in which her body and appearance are described, after which I will take a look at the figurative language used to describe her appearance and behaviour.

#### **3.2.1 “No brains but a great body”: Alma under the gaze of the Other**

In section 2.2, I introduced Jacques Lacan's theory of the Other and its crucial role in the constitution of the self. According to this view, the unity of the self is formed in relation to others and identity is in part a result of the way we believe others perceive us. The reaction from others is

paramount in defining what we are. The gaze of the Other is a significant influence in the construction of any individual's identity, including Joshua's. This was evident in the previous section in the way he tries to fit into his public image. However, the Other affects Alma on a far more fundamental level. Lacan offers this anecdote: "Not so long ago, a little girl said to me sweetly that it was about time somebody began to look after her so that she might seem lovable to herself" (2004, 257). Like the little girl, Alma finds her self-worth only in relation to others and therefore also defines herself through others. Although in her case it is noteworthy that the people she surrounds herself with abuse her instead of looking after her, which results in her believing she is not worth anything more.

The chapters that are narrated from Alma's perspective reveal why Lacan's idea of the gaze of the Other is so applicable in the analysis of Alma's identity. More than any other character in the novel, she is dependent on others in terms of her own identity. She exemplifies what Seppänen meant when he said the relationship between the Other and the subject was tragic (2004, 112): her whole existence depends on being the object of the Other. Other people see her as something, therefore she sees herself in the same way. It is noticeable how often she is referred to as the Tattooed Girl in the chapters that are from her own point of view, in instances such as "always the Tattooed Girl was good for a laugh" (144) or "[t]he Tattooed Girl was funny as somebody on TV" (148). Instead of thinking of herself as Alma, she sees herself in the role that has been assigned to her by others. There are times when she quite literally sees herself from the outside, from the place of the other: "at a distance she was watching herself curled up inside the blanket hunching her shoulders hugging herself and her face white as bread dough and her mouth slack and ugly" (100). Bread dough is a description that is used of her several times, by Alma herself as well. It epitomizes her lack of agency: she is kneaded, shaped and baked into something else by an agent that is not her. She seems to connect herself to the idea of softness, of being something that yields when some force outside of her wants her to do so: "It was like being spaded, she thought: like she was soft

soil, collapsing in their hands” (193). She does not feel like she is in control of her own body: “Her body was quicksand sliding away beneath her” (193).

Alma is not the first female character in Oates' body of work who is so clearly a product of the gaze of the Other. The most obvious comparison in that respect is Marilyn Monroe in the novel *Blonde*, which was published only a couple of years before *The Tattooed Girl*, in 2000. *Blonde* shares the idea of the visual construction of identity, because it charts the transformation of Norma Jean Baker into the iconic Monroe. Therefore I will be drawing connections between these two characters throughout this section. Ian Gregson defines the dominant theme in *Blonde* as “the gap between 'Marilyn Monroe', the construct created by the camera, and the 'real' woman and her life” (2006, 96). In *The Tattooed Girl*, there is a corresponding divide between the Tattooed Girl, the construct created by the gaze of the Other, and the real Alma:

[S]he'd wake up sometimes not the Tattooed Girl but Alma, and Alma had her own way of behaving. The Tattooed Girl was basically sweet female meat that could barely utter a coherent sentence and her eyes were out of focus and she breathed through her mouth like a dog and gave off a wet doggy heat but Alma was different, Alma could look straight at you and see you. (62)

The real Alma surfaces only on a rare occasion. Mostly she is the Tattooed Girl: a mere surface, simple flesh for the male crowd around her. Gregson writes that “the cinematic construct” known as Marilyn Monroe was “composed of male fantasies” (2006, 96), which is also true of Alma. Like for Monroe, Alma's Other is most often male, since most of the important people in Alma's life have been men: her father, Dmitri, Joshua, the assailants who tattooed her, and the numerous other abusers who are left unnamed.

The novel is narrated from a third-person limited omniscient point of view, and the chapters alternate between the perspectives of Dmitri, Joshua and Alma. Therefore not only are the thoughts and feelings of the characters brought to the front but also the different ways in which the characters perceive Alma are revealed. Dmitri's and Joshua's perceptions of her differ because she plays a different role in relation to them. For Dmitri, she is her body, which in turn is a way to make money. Alma considers him to be her boyfriend, but in reality he is her procurer. Joshua, on the other hand,

has a decidedly romanticized view of her: “Alma was so naively sweet-natured, so credulous and simple seeming, anyone might take advantage of her” (85). As an author and a scholar, he also filters his views on people through literature: “Like Virgil's Dido she seemed to him, had seemed to him from the start, not in eloquence for she had none, but in her manner and her physical being.” (242) Whereas others refer to Alma as trash, Joshua associates her with a tragic heroine.

Even though the gaze of the Other does not necessarily mean that identity is constructed visually, that aspect of it is of particular interest in Alma's case. With Joshua, the gaze refers more to a public opinion of him, because he has a reputation to uphold, but with Alma it is closely connected to her physical being, her body, face and appearance, all of which are under intense scrutiny. Her identity is a question of the body and its relationship to the self. Although there are some mentions of what the other characters look like, Alma is the only one whose appearance is described in such explicit detail. The following is only one such example:

She looked too earnest and pained to be a hooker, and not nearly glamorous enough, though her hair was ashblond, tumbling past her shoulders, and her face was young, sensual, striking; round and boneless as pulpy bread dough. Her skin was very white except for a magenta, moth-shaped mark on her right cheek. Her eyes were bruised and droopy-lidded and her small glistening mouth was slack as if she were breathing rapidly through it, a breath that was shallow and quick. Her forehead was low. Her breasts swung inside her shirt heavy as the breasts of a nursing mother. She was a fleshy girl who might have been sixteen or thirty. (23–24)

Gregson notes that in *Blonde*, masculine culture turns Monroe into a caricature (2006, 95). Alma's outward appearance is also described in a similar kind of exaggerated way, the result being that she comes across as synthetic or artificial in many respects. Her hair, mouth, skin and breasts are described with such frequency and detail that they overshadow all other aspects of her. Her hair merits description particularly often. It is described, for example, as “snarled straw-hair” (25) and “slutty hair like broom sage so dry somebody's going to light a match and toss it” (58). Her synthetic-looking, snarly hair is usually irresistible to men, as Alma notes when she wonders why Joshua had not touched her at all, “not even her hair that it was rare for men not to straggle their dirty fingers into” (101).

The colour of her skin is also often underlined, as there are many references to her “milky skin” (27), as well as her face in general: “Her full, round face was eerily white and the blemish on her cheek was prominent. And her mouth that cheap luscious red” (199). In fact, the whiteness of the skin is connected to strangeness: “The fleshy young woman with her unnaturally white, soft skin and mica-glinting eyes reminded Seigl of prostitutes he'd seen in Prague a few years before” (75). The connection to the Prague prostitutes is mentioned later on as well. Erving Goffman notes that upon first meeting, people can pick out clues from each other's conduct and appearance in order to “apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to [them]” (1956, 1). Based on only a few features, Joshua associates Alma with prostitutes. Therefore both Joshua and Dmitri connect Alma with the idea of prostitution, although as evidenced in the quotation in the previous paragraph, Dmitri does not feel she is “glamorous enough” (23). Of course, as a pimp, he is familiar with the market and knows what sells. Therefore for him, Alma is actually not artificial enough when they first meet.

Lacan argues that the gaze of the Other dictates the way we present ourselves in society, making us conform to the role that the Other assigns to us. For example, there are certain rules how to dress in a given situation. If a person does not adhere to these rules and adapt to the overall visual order of surrounding society, there will be trouble. (Seppänen 2004, 121) Alma's clothes are described in far more detail than any other character's, suggesting that in terms of identity, they are more important for her than for others. Her clothes are another feature that defines her in the eyes of others, and her evolution can be seen in the way that she dresses. Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson note how, according to theorists such as Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, dress communicates in some ways as a kind of language, because “dress and language are part of the same fundamental human concern, namely to communicate” (2001, 2). There are some issues with this analogy, most noticeably that dress, unlike language, is not bounded by precise grammatical rules but is instead suggestive and ambiguous (2001, 3). Yet this provides an interesting point of view in terms of Alma's clothes and her identity, because she tries to fit into the role that is expected

of her by way of her dress, but falls short despite her effort. As I discuss in section 4.2, she does not master language the way other people around her do, and the same can be said of the way she dresses. She tries to communicate through her clothes but does not really have the required code. For example, when she begins her job as Joshua's assistant, she is not dressed correctly: "She should have worn more casual clothes, not her cheaply dressy pleated wool skirt and red nylon sweater with three-quarter sleeves, that looked like items purchased in a bargain bin at Kmart" (92). This, of course, also denotes her class status, as it were, which was discussed in the previous section. It is impossible for her to blend in with the rich people around her, because her clothes betray her economic situation.

As dress is a way of communicating who we are or who we think we are, it is important to note that at the beginning of the novel, Alma is actually dressed by others to some extent. In section 3.1.2, I mentioned that Jet's appearance is said to resemble a costume, which suggests deliberation on her part. Compared with Alma being dressed by others, the difference in the levels of their agency is striking. She does not have much choice in the way she dresses: "He saw with pitying tenderness that she was wearing a man's shirt she'd been given, obviously it didn't fit her, oversized at the shoulders and even at the breasts" (27). This is the first time she meets Dmitri, so this sets the stage for their relationship. Goffman emphasizes the importance of first impression, arguing that "[t]he individual's initial projection commits [them] to what [they are] proposing to be and requires [them] to drop all pretences of being other things" (1956, 1). Because Dmitri identifies Alma as someone who he can manipulate from the beginning, it is difficult to challenge this power structure later on. The next time Alma's clothes are described she is working at a book shop: "She wore a soiled lime green Book Seller smock over a cheap red turtleneck sweater, jeans that fit her fleshy hips snugly, and new-looking sneakers, without socks" (74). The point about clothes issued by the employer is, of course, that the employees fit the corporate identity instead of expressing their own. Entwistle and Wilson write that fashion has a tendency to reinvent the body, find ways to conceal or reveal certain parts of the body, thereby "making the body visible and interesting to look at" (2001,

4). This aspect of fashion is what Alma emphasizes given the chance. When she has the opportunity to express herself through the way she dresses, she uses that chance to flaunt her body:

In her room downstairs, Alma dressed for the party, too. She brushed her hair until sparks flew. She tamped it down with barrettes so it wasn't so flyaway. She made up her face carefully, powdering over the tattoo. (You could still see it, of course. But it looked less like dried blood and more like just a raised blemish in the skin.) Alma had a black dress with a rhinestone belt and a scoop-necked black lace bodice she'd bought at a post-holiday sale at Penney's she thought would be OK for her, since she'd be wearing a white apron over it. In the mirror, she looked a little anxious but sexy as hell. (210–211)

Gregson notes that in *Blonde*, Monroe is remarkably adept at anticipating the male gaze that is directed at her and therefore she is able to invent herself in the terms to which it would most respond (2006, 97). In other words, Marilyn fulfilled the expectations that men had of her by looking a certain way, but this was a conscious decision on her part. Compared to Marilyn, however, Alma has far less agency. Her tattoos make this particularly blatant: her looks have been violently altered by the men around her, thus taking the possibility of choice away from her. They are the ultimate way of someone else taking control of her being. They are “disfiguring” (23), her cheek is “blemished” (24), it is “[I]ike her face which was this soft baby-girl face was marred, marked” (58). She has been innocent but has been defaced.

The only choice left for her to make is how she explains the tattoos to other people. She keeps changing her story about them, telling a different version depending on who she is talking to. To Dmitri she admits they are in fact tattoos: “Yes the mark on her cheek was a tattoo. Maybe it was meant to be a moth, how should she know.” (27) However, to Joshua she says it is a birthmark. On neither of these occasions does she actually volunteer the story herself, but rather the other person makes an assumption about the marks, which she then claims is true. Their guesses reveal what they want to hear and she fixes her story accordingly.

Dmitri and Joshua have disparate reactions to the tattoos. Dmitri is first and foremost annoyed at them, because they are not good for his business: on one hand, “[t]hey made Alma a novelty, which was good” (60) but on the other hand they were not vivid enough to attract a niche market: “And the tattoos. They were mildly intriguing. Nothing to turn a guy seriously on. A guy who is into

tattoos, body piercing, that kind of shit. To that kind of guy, Alma would be a disappointment.” (58) Because of this, he toys with the idea of tattooing her more (64). Dmitri's attitude towards the tattoos shows that to him Alma is a mere commodity. In this regard he is a figure similar to Corky in Oates' novel *What I Lived For*. Gregson writes:

The attitude to women is more complex and explicitly linked in the novel to commodification. Here the key device is the colouring of the women characters by Corky's perspective, which reduces them to commodities and then to waste. He is unable to see women as characters at all – his point of view automatically caricatures them. (2006, 83)

Both Corky and Dmitri also think of women as something that can be discarded when they are no longer useful. The first time Alma comes to Carmel Heights she is compared to trash. She looked like “flotsam that had floated up from the city” (21) that has been “deposited [...] here as a river, after a flood, retreating from its banks, deposits debris in its wake” (22). That is the way Dmitri sees her, so he also feels he is allowed to weigh her down and dump her in a lake if need be (63).

Joshua has quite the opposite reaction to her tattoos. For him, the imperfections in her are exactly the thing that makes her alluring. As already evidenced in the comparison to Virgil's Dido, he sees her as a tragic figure who has been dealt a bad hand in life: “Seigl was touched by the blemish on her cheek, the disfigurement of what might have been Alma's beauty” (77). Even though Joshua has a much more humane approach to Alma, he is still focused on her appearance instead of seeing her as an actual person. There is also the idea that Alma could be beautiful if only she would be slightly altered. “The mark on her cheek was unfortunate: it made her look smudged, despoiled. Your impulse was to reach out and brush the blemish away.” (74–75) Even after being told that the mark is a birthmark, which would mean it is a natural feature of Alma's, Joshua considers paying for the mark to be removed. Although this is a less violent reaction than Dmitri's, it nevertheless suggests that not only is Alma not perfect the way she is, but that he can make her so. “More than once it had crossed Seigl's mind, gazing at his assistant as a lepidopterist might gaze at an exotic butterfly, that he might offer Alma the possibility of cosmetic surgery to have the marks removed or at least lightened. *Your beauty shouldn't be defaced, Alma.*” (222, emphasis in original) Alma's body

is something that other people are allowed to change if it does not fit the image they want her to have.

### 3.2.2 “A female mollusc she seemed to him”: metaphorical depictions of Alma

Because Alma's appearance is described so frequently and in such detail, it also naturally follows that the other characters often compare her to other creatures and entities. Therefore in this section I will analyse what kind of metaphors and similes are used in connection with her, and what kinds of attributes are associated with her. Zoltán Kövecses writes that metaphor has traditionally been considered a feature of literature rather than ordinary language. It has been seen as “a conscious and deliberate use of words,” which requires special skill from the speaker or writer (2002, vii). He also notes the common belief that metaphor is not an inevitable part of human communication but that it has instead been used for special effects (2002, viii). However, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson propose the theory of conceptual metaphor in their highly influential work *Metaphors We Live By*. They argue that metaphors are actually ubiquitous in everyday life, and in fact not only in language but in thought and action as well (2003, 4). According to them, the concepts that govern our thought determine “what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (ibid). Therefore the metaphors that Dmitri and Joshua use in reference to Alma show not only how they see her but how they see themselves in relation to her. As Alma's identity is constructed to a significant extent through the ways other people see her and what they think of her, these areas of meaning connected to her go a long way in explaining why she is the way she is.

I have previously argued that the focus on Alma's body and appearance results in the impression that she is only a surface instead of an actual person with thoughts and feelings as well. This idea culminates in her being compared to dolls, which are, after all, lifeless playthings with no free will or in fact any cognitive processes at all. Gregson has noted similar metaphors in *Blonde*, arguing that in her later works, Oates' focus has been “upon the reification of women, especially

evident in her recent novel *Blonde*, where Marilyn Monroe is repeatedly referred to as a terribly vulnerable sex doll” (2006, 5).

Usually dolls are associated with beauty or cuteness. For example, one of the meanings listed for “doll” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “[a] pretty, but unintelligent or empty person”. When a woman's appearance is likened to a doll, the doll in question is usually Barbie or some other miniature adult female, and therefore the woman looks like the ideal woman. However, in Alma's case the beauty part of the comparison is mostly missing, and she is more often compared to dolls that take form of small children or even babies.

Instead of using the general term doll, Alma is also compared to specific types of dolls, which emphasize different characteristics in Alma. Firstly, she is compared to a rag doll: “That stiff ash-blond rag doll comatose with her head resting on her arms” (38). *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines the term rag doll as “[a] doll made of rags or cloth, [...] typically representing a child rather than a baby, and dressed in old-fashioned clothes. Also fig.: an insignificant or inconsequential person.” Rag dolls are limp and unable to remain upright or seated without support. Because of this, they need someone to manipulate them into various positions. Therefore the implication is that Alma is similarly unable to function without someone supporting her. Rag doll is also a reference to her low value, as these types of dolls are often made at home from whatever pieces of leftover fabrics one can find. Dmitri in particular makes the connection between Alma, dolls, and cheapness: “That stiff ash-blond hair did look like a doll's hair. Not a human-hair doll, but the cheap kind.” (38) She is also described as “a big wind-up doll” (64), which suggests her total lack of control of herself. Someone else sets her in motion and decides her actions. In addition to these, there is a third kind of doll to which Alma is compared: “She was beautiful and faintly absurd and touching as a kewpie doll.” (225) This rare reference to her beauty shows Joshua's opinion of her. However, this does not only denote her prettiness, but also her artificiality, as kewpie dolls are chubby child-figures with no clothes and painted-on smiles. Not only that, but they are also mass produced: there are millions of them and they all look exactly the same.

Joshua in particular sees childlike qualities in Alma. When describing her physically, these metaphors are used especially in reference to her face, for example “childish face round as a full moon” (74), “her face which was this soft baby-girl face” (58) and “[h]er ordinarily childlike docile face had taken on a hard, blank-doll glaze” (248). This is in stark contrast to the depictions of her body, which emphasize her very feminine and very much adult features. Even though her body may be all grown up, her behaviour is often described as childlike, especially by Joshua. He sees childlikeness both as a positive and a negative attribute, depending on the situation. When things do not go according to his plan, it is a negative thing. For example when Joshua pries into Alma's private life and ends up getting his feelings hurt after she rebuffs him: “For hours afterward he smarted from the encounter. Alma's childish behavior.” (243) Evidently, Joshua sees himself as the adult in his relationship with Alma, and therefore it is easy to blame Alma in times of conflict. Alma is the one at fault because she does not, in his opinion, understand how adults interact with each other. At other times, however, Alma's apparent childishness is more praiseworthy: “Like a stubborn child, frightened, yet standing her ground” (277).

The references to Alma's childlike qualities also show that in the relationship between Joshua and Alma, Joshua has the upper hand because he is her intellectual superior. Therefore he cannot comprehend it when Alma actually reads his book: “Never would he have expected Alma Busch of all people to be standing before him, clutching a copy of *The Shadows* against her young shapely body” (250). This shows that Joshua has his own preconceived notion of Alma as nothing but surface, because he views her as a one-dimensional being with limited intellect or at least intellectual curiosity. Mostly, though, Joshua sees her as an innocent child who needs protection: “She's safe under this roof. I am that girl's protector.” (172) He is her guardian, in both senses of the word: not only is he her protector but at times he also appears almost like her parent. She must be guarded from the big bad world: “In profile her face was childlike, rapt in concentration; the ugly birthmark, or tattoo as Jet insisted it must be, wasn't visible. Seigl though, She hasn't heard. She has

been spared.” (139) This shows that in Joshua's opinion, Alma is something less than an adult capable of handling whatever comes her way.

Another view of their relationship from Joshua's perspective is that of a teacher and his student: “Alma was hugging herself nervously. She looked like a schoolgirl who has dared to contradict her teacher.” (248) However one looks at their relationship, it is clear that Joshua is the one who always has the upper hand. His control is further emphasized by his role as her employer. In that capacity, Alma is not referred to as his assistant, but as his “girl-assistant” (242). At times even that is not enough, but her femaleness is further underlined: she is “his straw-headed big-breasted girl-assistant” (165). Kähkönen points out similar use of the word girl in *Blonde*, where it refers to Monroe's childlikeness rather than to her young age (2009, 295).

Whereas in Joshua's references to children and childishness the connotations are most often those of innocence, naïveté and fragility, Dmitri's corresponding references focus on another aspect: “What a dirty, coarse child Alma was” (30). She is a child who does not adhere to the basic rules of civil society, namely manners and personal hygiene. Instead she is uncivilized, even animal-like. This brings us to another significant source of metaphor relating to Alma: animals. Robert A. Palmatier prefaces his *Dictionary of Animal Metaphors* by explaining why he does not include humans in his definition of animals: humans have language, animals do not (1995, xi). Ergo, humans create metaphors and animals do not. Interestingly, although there are plenty of metaphors and similes in *The Tattooed Girl*, Alma seldom uses them. She is the target of these metaphors, not the one who creates them. She does not have the capacity for creativity or figurative speech as she is too literal-minded, which Joshua notes time and again. Her inability to use language to its full potential is discussed further in section 4.2.

Palmatier also notes that metaphors speak of humans behaving like animals, for example, which indicates that “humans regard themselves as superior to the other, or 'lower,' animals” (1995, vii)). This manifests itself in the chapters that are told from Dmitri's perspective, which are also the chapters that employ animal metaphors most often. He uses these kinds of metaphors in a blatantly

negative way, frequently associating her with animals that have somewhat negative connotations. Alma is often compared to a cat: “She was yawning, a wide humid yawn, unconscious as a cat” (41). However, mostly these are not references to the domesticated cat, but the wild variety. According to Kövecses, the wild animal metaphor shows the struggle between a master and an animal which attempts to flee from said master, and therefore the master and the animal are each other's opponents (2000, 59). In the case of *The Tattooed Girl* the fight ends in the master's victory, as Dmitri tames Alma. She is “like a feral cat” (25) and before taking her in, Dmitri “[b]athed her, disinfected/fumigated her” (59). The idea of her being dirty and uncivilized is present yet again, but this time with an added insinuation that she is diseased. However, there is also a contradicting view that Alma has in fact been domesticated but mistreated: “She would shrink away like a kicked dog” (26) as well as “[n]ot a panicked feral creature, this sad-eyed girl, but a domestic creature who has been beaten and traumatized but can be reclaimed” (27). Dmitri even shows her apparent kindness: “He was feeding her now” (28). Noticeably, Dmitri is also compared to a dog, but he is not just any kind of dog: “Like a dog – yet an elegant breed, a borzoi – Dmitri stooped to sniff the girl's odor” (26). Whereas Alma is compared to feral animals or mistreated dogs of unspecified breed, Dmitri is a purebred. This shows that in Dmitri's opinion he is worth more than Alma.

Borzoi, also known as the Russian wolfhound, was bred to hunt game. This kind of hunting imagery is widely used in the novel, for example when Dmitri first sees Alma and he compares himself to a shark: “Immediately, his keen predator's senses were aroused. Though he didn't approach her immediately. He was a sidelong slantwise type. One of the those silent – gliding – lethal – deep-sea predators with lateral vision, eyes on both sides of a flat blade of a face.” (23) According to OED, when applied to a person in a figurative manner the word shark has the “allusion to the predatory habits and voracity of the shark; one who enriched himself by taking advantage of the necessities of others.” Thus this metaphor describes Dmitri's personality, but also places Alma in relation to him. In this scenario, Alma is the pray. Dmitri is on the top of the food chain and Alma on the bottom. The theme of Alma being foodstuff continues as she is compared to

animals that are bred for human consumption: “A beautiful soft fleshy goose you wanted to fatten. Stuff her milky white face and throat with the richest foods till her liver swelled, ripened, burst.” (28) Such geese have no other function than to be eaten: they are brought into existence to die. It is the ultimate example of one's life being in the hands of another: both life and death are decided by someone else.

The metaphors Dmitri and Joshua use differ from each other, and thus the metaphors they use say just as much about them as they do about Alma. As Charles Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi comment, “show me your metaphors and I will tell you who you are” (2009, 11). The difference between Dmitri and Joshua is particularly clear in their use of animal metaphors, because Joshua uses far less metaphors with obvious negative connotations (such as dirtiness). Instead the emphasis is rather on the intellectual imbalance between them. Dmitri emphasizes the physical body, Joshua the underdeveloped mind. “Yet he smiled down at this awkward buxom girl standing so passively before him. Like a young farm creature, a sleek young calf for instance, waiting to be herded in one direction or another.” (77) Alma is again at a disadvantage here, but this time it is because she lacks a mind of her own. Her age is also pointed out yet again. In a way this is another example of the student-teacher relationship already mentioned earlier: a teacher guides their pupils, just as the young calf needs guidance.

The only references to Alma being a beautiful creature are also from Joshua's point of view. As has already been mentioned earlier, he has a romanticized picture of Alma: “There was his assistant Alma Busch waiting for him in the outer office. Like a gaudy brightly hued butterfly amid ordinary moths.” (199) The connotations with this one are twofold: Joshua has referred to Alma's beauty before, so this could be taken to mean fragility, uniqueness, and beauty. However, it also accentuates her difference. She might be pretty but she is out of place. Joshua sees Alma as something extraordinary, especially in the references to her kindness which she supposedly has underneath her indifferent exterior.

This is in stark contrast to Dmitri's view of her as an invertebrate: "A mollusc is so soft you want to squeeze and squeeze until your fist shuts upon itself..." (58) Alma is something that can be simply squished to death with bare hands. There is another comparison to the same creature, this time with added femininity: "A female mollusc she seemed to him. Boneless, white. As if somebody split open a giant shell, spilled out what was inside. Some guys are crazy for it. Female that's big soft floppy breasts all over." (57) The idea of Alma being "boneless" is something that is repeated again and again in the novel. It is found in contexts like "her boneless white baby face" (41), where it is connected to a childlike quality in her, her softness, the ability for someone else to mould her as they wish. When she is compared to an invertebrate, it implies that she is also wanting a metaphorical backbone, which OED defines as "[s]trength of character, stability of purpose, resoluteness, sturdiness, firmness." Whereas Joshua sees her as something that can be guided along, Dmitri sees her as something to be moulded: "He would knead her soft white skin like bread dough" (28). For Dmitri, a pimp, this seems to be a general female quality. For him, Alma is merely flesh, thereby something of which one can take advantage: "The best kind of female meat, that would move in the direction in which she was nudged, unresisting" (42).

Connected to these animal metaphors and similes is Dmitri's use of the term female instead of woman or even girl, which suggests he regards women as equals with animals. According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, female as a noun is generally used when referred to lower animals, and otherwise it is mostly pejorative. Dmitri's use of the word is quite systematic, for example when he says "[t]here was so much of this female, quivering in the soapy water" (59) and "watching females gorge themselves disgusted him" (28). The latter example is not just a comment on Alma, but on women in general. It is not the greedy and sloppy eating as such that he finds so revolting, but the fact that a woman is doing so. The theme of women being disgusting continues when they are compared to animal faeces: "He knew how to speak to strung-out females. Lost females. Females that other guys, including possibly their own fathers, have scraped off their shoes like dog shit." (59)

All in all, Alma is the product of the different ways other people see her. Compared to another female character in the novel, Jet, or to Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*, she has far less control of her identity. This is largely due to her history of being abused, which has led her to believe she deserves what she gets. Although the men in her life have different views of her, the common thread is that in comparison to them, she is always the weak one. She does not have agency over her own life, unlike Jet, who does whatever she wants to do. Joshua notes the fictitious nature of his sister: “Yet, he guessed it was with Jet as with many women of contemporary type, who took their cues from stylized and exaggerated images of female behavior in the media: you never know what was genuine, and what was invented.” (115) Both Alma and Jet are inventions, but the difference between them is that Jet invents herself, whereas Alma, or the Tattooed Girl, is invented by others. For a brief moment, Alma sees this clearly: “And catching sight of her swollen-looking white face and defiant red mouth in the distending convex mirror above the cashier's counter she would think, trembling with indignation, *That isn't me, that's somebody they made me be.*” (191, emphasis in original)

### 3.3 Shared spaces and colliding worlds

In the previous two sections I have analysed the ways in which identity is constructed through Otherness. As Joshua's and Alma's identities are constructed in different ways, I have thus far endeavoured to keep the analysis pertaining to each of them quite separate. In this section, however, I will discuss what happens when people from such different backgrounds meet. I will begin this section by analysing the setting of the novel, because the space where they meet and live is important in understanding some of the tension between them. This discussion leads to the main part of this section, in which I analyse how different characters use violence to construct their identities.

The setting of *The Tattooed Girl* emphasizes the class difference between the characters, and even increases the tension between them. The novel takes place in the affluent suburb of Carmel

Heights, near Rochester, New York. The population there is very well-to-do: some are members of established upper-class families with inherited wealth, others belong to the faculty of the University of Rochester or work in other well-respected and well-paid professions. Susan Allen Ford, who has studied the settings in several novels by Oates, notes that this is one of the geographies that is typical in her work, namely “the sterile suburban-intellectual worlds of the upper-middle-class northeastern corridor” (2002, 305). According to Ford, Oates' depictions of suburban landscapes in Northeastern United States recur in several of her novels, and although the precise city often changes, there are certain characteristics that remain:

[I]t is a world characterized by comfortable houses in clearly defined lots; by dinner parties and jobs in which people are paid to think while growing distant from their bodies; by surfaces without history, revealing the mechanisms through which people struggle to control their lives; and by sudden eruptions of violence, which shatter these surfaces. (2002, 306)

The setting of the novel underlines Alma's Otherness from other people's perspective, and also increases her own feeling of being an outsider. She has drifted to Carmel Heights from rural Pennsylvania, from “Akron Valley: Hellfire PA” (101), where everyone is just as poor as she is and with similar level of education. There was nothing conspicuous about her there, nothing that would make her stand out from the crowd in a negative way. In Carmel Heights she finds herself amongst rich people, whose codes of behaviour are foreign to her. She is now forced to live in a sterile environment with people that have unnecessarily large houses, which is the exact opposite to what she is used to: “people in Akron Valley with five or six kids living in some wood frame 'bungalow' at the edge of a sinkhole or they lived in trailers” (152). The notion that Alma does not belong in her environment is mentioned again and again, even by Joshua, who is usually careful with his words: “But you're not from Carmel Heights, Alma.' It was a statement, not a question.” (77) Alma is an outsider and there is nothing she can do to change that.

Not only is she now in a new and strange society, but the places where Alma and Joshua meet also show that Alma is at a disadvantage because she is on unknown territory. The first time Joshua meets Alma is at The Café, where he is playing chess with his friends, not even noticing how much

money he is spending while doing so, whereas Alma is sneakily trying to eat other customers' leftovers. The first time they have an actual conversation is at the Book Seller, where Alma is berated for not being able to shelve books in the right way. She is, after all, barely literate. Joshua, on the other hand, is again in his element, since he is both a regular customer and the author of several of the books sold there. There is a cultural divide between them, in some ways even a language barrier, and that manifests itself quite literally in the book store, as Alma is “[h]idden from Seigl by rows of books” (72). The third place their worlds collide is at Joshua's home, which Alma also eventually moves into. Although this is due to practical reasons and not because of any desire on Joshua's part to control Alma, the result of this is that his power over her increases, because she is now on his territory. She is constantly on edge there because she is afraid of making a mistake and she is not sure what is expected of her. In fact, Alma never has her own space. Instead, she is first in her father's house, after that Dmitri's, and then finally Joshua's. Not only is her identity constructed in relation to others, but she is physically dependent on them to offer her shelter.

The various kinds of tensions between the characters mean that the possibility of violence is constantly present. This is hardly surprising, since violence and anger are the themes which are most often associated with Oates. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a novel by her which does not have any elements of violence in it. Although Oates has been criticized for what some have termed sensational violence, Samuel J. Kirubahar refutes this criticism, instead arguing that in Oates' works violence is not accidental, but instead an unavoidable result of tension. According to him, her works are accounts of “the sense of impotence, the absence of self-affirmation, the failure to establish meaningful relationships with other persons, which confirm and bolster one's self-image and the ultimate failure to accept one's limited power” (2011, 111).

Ian Gregson notes that there is often a rage inside Oates' characters which motivates their actions, and which often culminates in vengeful violence (2006, 79). Gregson has studied Oates' depictions of violence in connection with social inequality, finding reasons for the violence in class distinctions and the divide between the rich and the poor. Indeed, he goes on to say that “few

contemporary writers have evoked poverty and its psychological consequences with such obsessive accuracy as Oates, and few have been as preoccupied with the difference that money makes” (2006, 81). Gregson argues that the violence in Oates' work is due to political anger, the characters' “response to their social impotence, and [...] an attempt to reject their political transformation into docile cogs in the machine” (2006, 81–82). Although Gregson focuses his analysis on Oates' novel *Foxfire*, a story about a girl gang, similar reasoning can be used to understand the violence in *The Tattooed Girl* as well.

The default approach the characters in the novel have towards one another is to focus on their otherness. Rather than take note of the similarities that they might have, they accentuate the differences. Gregson notes that “the unrealness of others dehumanizes them” (2006, 84). It is often the case in *The Tattooed Girl* that the characters do not see each other as complete people, but instead a single feature of them is emphasized, thus making them appear one-sided and flat, mere caricatures of people. With Joshua this one defining aspect is his apparent Jewishness, with Alma her body. This mental caricaturing becomes a facet of “othering”. Because of this, violence against them is much easier. Empathy is not an obstacle if you cannot view the other as a person, with thoughts and feelings just like your own. “Not very likely, though: that Joshua Seigl could put himself in Alma Busch's place.” (86) Although Joshua is not the one acting violent, this thought process applies to the others. They cannot put themselves in the other's position.

Violence is also an easy solution for the characters because it is something they are used to, both personally and as members of American society. As I noted in section 2.3, violence is a part of the cultural fabric of the United States, and I also referred to Richard Slotkin's argument that violence has had a significant role in the formation of American national identity. Barry R. Schaller has also written about violence in an American context. He focuses his study on internal violence, which means violence occurring within the country, between individuals or groups (1997, 57). Internal violence is further divided into two distinct types, crime-related and situational, the latter of which is relevant in the analysis of *The Tattooed Girl*. Situational violence occurs “in the course of

ordinary events when people are in conflict” (1997, 57). This is an important distinction, because it shows that violence is not only the domain of criminals, but rather it is a solution that anyone can resort to when occasion arises. In the case of *The Tattooed Girl*, there are three characters who use some kind of violence: Jet, Dmitri and Alma. They come from different backgrounds, occupy different roles in society, indeed have little in common with each other, save for the fact that violence is a part of their life.

The violence in the novel comes in many forms, and the characters all have different reasons for their violent acts. First of all there is Dmitri, who is violent both physically and mentally. The main reason for his behaviour is to keep Alma under his control. His violence is methodical, used continually without hesitation. It also varies in severity, ranging from pulling her hair to kicking her and forcing drugs down her throat. As I mentioned in the previous section, he compares himself to animals that are on the top of the food chain. This comparison is further enhanced by his violent behaviour, which is in many ways similar to that of an animal: he is the leader of the pack who asserts his position through violence.

He laughed, enjoying this. This cunt! This cunt was too much. Trying to fend him, Dmitri, off with her feeble outspread fingers like trying to fend off machine gun fire with your bare hands. Made him laugh aloud. Cunt, he called her, fat cunt, knocked her staggering backward with a clip to the jaw, so hard he hurt his knuckles, one-two slamming her in the fat boobs, he'd knock her fucking teeth out, she tried this shit again. A human punching bag, the Tattooed Girl.  
Every guy needs this, sometimes. (62–63)

He likes the feeling that he gets when he uses violence against another person: “He'd grip the nape of her soft neck, push the meds against her mouth and hold his hand against her mouth until she swallowed, swallowed again, began to whimper, choke. *Mollusc is so soft you want to squeeze squeeze squeeze squeeze.*” (61, emphasis in original) There is no greater power than to decide whether another person lives or dies. Alma's helplessness provokes Dmitri even further: he cannot help but take advantage of her softness. Noticeably, there is a similar line of thinking from Alma towards Joshua: what she perceives as weakness in him is one of the reasons she so abhors him. “That quiet

voice of his. She hated such weakness! You wanted to cry hearing such weakness in a man, fuck it.”  
(159)

The imagery Dmitri uses in connection with Alma is also that of violence, which emphasizes how he views her in comparison to himself. Even when he is talking about her metaphorically, he is always the subject and she the object. “He would turn her inside out the way, tugging with a forefinger, you can gut a fish.” (28) The violent imagery is also evident in the way he views her tattoos. Whereas Joshua considers paying for cosmetic surgery to have them removed, Dmitri's first instinct is to react with violence. “Like a moth with frayed wings spread like it was trying to fly away except when you look closer the thing's dead, won't ever fly. And you want to swat it. Pow!” (58) The imaginary moth represents Alma: she resists violence as little as the moth resists the swatting.

Alma does not fight back because violence is what she is used to. The lifelong abuse she has been subjected to by different people close to her means she has been conditioned for it. You cannot fight against something that you believe to be the natural order of things. “Don't hit me. Don't hurt me. Don't send me away, please...” (57) For her, it is worse to be sent away than be hit, which is why she accepts anything Dmitri does to her. The power structure is ingrained in her to such an extent that she automatically assumes that if Dmitri abuses her, she must be at fault: “Oh, honey! Don't, hey please don't hit me, I'm sorry, I'm sorry for whatever dumb thing I did, honey please?” (59) She never rebels against Dmitri, even though he is the one who hits her. She has hatred for Joshua and her past abusers, but not Dmitri. Not only is she used to the violence, but she is desperate not to be left alone. “I love you. Let me... let me love you?” (59)

Overall, there is a very thin line between love and hate in the novel. Jet stabs her lover and Alma wavers between loving and hating Joshua. Rosemary F. Franklin has studied the connection between violence and romantic love in Oates' novels. According to Franklin, the romantic love depicted by Oates is most often manic love, the kind of love that makes one want to kill their loved one if they cannot have them. Therefore it can be said that just as the violence depicted in Oates'

works is extreme, so is the love. Franklin analyses Oates' works with the help of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theories on Abjection. According to this view, a person's autonomy is threatened in a relationship. "The woman begins to 'abject' the lover, to cast him out, because she must be free or her ego will be hopelessly enmeshed in the Other/Lover" (1998, 29).

Franklin argues that Oates has a recurring female character in her work, namely "a borderline psychotic who wants her emptiness filled" (1998, 28). This is a rather apt description of Jet, who is severely disturbed. Throughout her life, she has been diagnosed as a border-line personality, bipolar, and "latent paranoid schizophrenic" (118), depending on psychological trends of the time. Franklin writes that "[d]eranged by 'love', [Oates'] women struggle to be other than objects of it." (1998, 47) Therefore it is not surprising it is Jet who takes her struggle to such extreme measures. After all, she is the one who has actively constructed her own identity, so it stands to reason she would react so violently to efforts made to try to oppress her in any way. She is the captain of her own life, at least in her delusions.

Jet's mental imbalance explains the kind of violence she uses. She does things at the spur of the moment without really thinking things through, with no consideration for the consequences. Her mania is such that she does not even remember what she has done: "Seeing then in the mirror, in surprise: blood in her hair? And on her white silk blouse, and on her belted, beige linen trousers?" (306) Her violence manifests itself mostly through stabbing: she stabbed both her former lover and Alma multiple times, although only the latter results in death. Even a copy of *The Shadows* ends up in a "sorry state, water-stained and stabbed-at" (251) as a result of her wrath. Her violence is a quick action due to momentary surge of anger, with lethal intention. It is not something that happens often, only in the moments when things do not go according to plan to such an extent that it threatens her reality. Rather than the systematic violence that Dmitri uses in order to maintain superiority over someone else, Jet's violence consists of acts of passion. There is a somewhat similar explanation for her attack on Alma, even though that was not the result of romantic love. Alma is, however, a similar threat to her identity. As I argued in section 3.1, Jet's identity is

constructed in such close relation to Joshua that Alma's presence in his life threatens Jet's view of herself as well.

Kristeva's *Subject* offers a good explanation for Jet's behaviour, but I would argue it cannot be used to explain Alma's violence. Franklin writes that “[a] self must have boundaries, a life in addition to that she enjoys with the lover, for Kristeva and Oates agree that constructive love can occur only between those who have achieved a stable ego.” (1998, 47) Alma, however, is hardly an autonomous subject to begin with, relying so much on others in defining her own identity. Therefore her violence cannot be seen as lashing out against a threat to her subjectivity. Instead, she seems quite satisfied to not be autonomous, which explains her desperate attempt to make Dmitri love her. She is defined by the relationship she has with another person, not as an individual subject. Her violence against Joshua is explained in part by her wish to please Dmitri, and in part by cultural reasons. As I argued in section 3.1, Dmitri and Alma find common ground from their hatred of Jewish people. Therefore in order for this shared experience to continue, Alma does whatever it takes to impress Dmitri. There is a boastfulness in the way she tells Dmitri and his friends what she plans to do to Joshua:

Holding the guys' attention she was drawing Dmitri's attention, too. Dmitri's wandering eyes. Dmitri's sly smile. The Tattooed Girl was burning hot waving her arms as she danced like a wounded pheasant in the underbrush.  
 “I'm gonna! I'm gonna do it! Kill the Jew! One of these days! He provokes me, I'm gonna!” (206)

There is a similar pattern in what she plans for her assailants as well: “I run into those bastards again, I'm gonna kill them. I'll get a gun. Or a knife. Think I won't? I will! I'm tougher than I look. Smarter, too.” (60) She does not actually go through with much of what she plans. She has violent thoughts but not much action. This is actually quite a consistent pattern in her behaviour: she is not the one who does things, she is the one things are done to. Her passivity is blatant not only in her reaction to the constant abuse she receives from Dmitri, but also during Jet's first attack on her:

Appalled, he saw his sister slap Alma's face, he saw Alma crouch whimpering, pressing both hands over her nose; blood trickled through her fingers. Seigl would recall afterward how strangely passive Alma was: she hadn't shoved Jet away, hadn't done

much more than try to protect herself against Jet's wild flailing blows. Yet Alma was clearly strong, and might have overpowered Jet if she'd tried. (141)

Her passivity against Dmitri blows is easily explained by the fact that she thinks she loves him, and even believes she somehow deserves what she gets, but that hardly explains her lack of retaliation against Jet. Rather she is conforming to the role that has traditionally been hers: that of the victim. Her lack of agency, which has already been discussed in previous sections, is further evidenced here.

Even though she is more talk than action, the resentment she feels towards Joshua is real. Perhaps the very fact that she does not have much of a chance to act makes her resentment worse. An important factor in her hatred and violent thoughts towards Joshua is the resentment caused by their vastly different economic situations. Their differences are evident in everyday things. For example, she resents Joshua for sending out his laundry and having it delivered in his home:

Straight-backed and trembling with indignation Alma tore off the cellophane wrappers from Seigl's laundry and dry cleaning. [...] Never in all these weeks of working for Seigl had she grown to tolerate the lavishness of his spending which she surmised to be out of ignorance.

*Ironed pajamas! Fucking ironed underwear and socks!* (162, emphases in original)

Alma cannot understand Joshua's expensive ways, which are not only an unfamiliar habit for her but also rob her of ways in which she could be useful in Joshua's life. Alma has been hired to assist Joshua, but is not allowed to perform her duties to her full potential. She may not be educated, but there are things she excels at, things she *knows* she is good at and which therefore give her confidence. It is a small victory for her when she finally gets to take over the laundry and ironing: "See, Mr. Seigl, it's a lot cheaper. And I'm good at it." She was never so happy as when she charged about the house with a roll of paper and Windex in hand." (221) These are tasks that she is in control of and she knows where she stands when she does them, not having to worry she might be doing something wrong.

Alma is used to strong male figures telling her what to do, so she has a difficult time trying to adjust to Joshua's ways and find her place in a different environment. Even a servant's duties are too difficult for her to comprehend in the rich people's world she has been brought to: when she makes

a special effort to dress nicely before she is to help at a fancy dinner Joshua holds, she is humiliated and told to get out of the way. The cultural difference between them even extends to the kind of discourse they are used to. She is suspicious of his politeness, thinking it is some sort of elaborate joke at her expense:

[M]ost of all she hated this employer for giving her orders in his prissy backward way. Like he needed to be polite to Alma Busch! Almost, it was like a joke: “Alma, would you have time to–?” or “Alma, if it isn't too much trouble perhaps you could–?” or “When you have a chance, Alma, I wonder if–”  
Alma mumbled some kind of reply. Why the fuck didn't he just tell her what to do!  
(161)

These are little things that fester and lead to severe discontent and resentment on her part. Because of this, the acts she performs to harm him are especially apt: unlike Jet, for example, she does not resort to sudden bursts of violence, but instead does little things that can have lethal results as they culminate. She switches his medicine, loosens the bolts in the terrace railings, and crushes little shards of glass in his food, although she aborts the last plan before Joshua has a change to eat the food. These acts also boost her self-confidence, since the stupid Alma is able to plan such dangerous plots without the clever Joshua noticing. Therefore although violence is used against her to oppress her, she is also able to use little acts with violent intentions to empower herself.

However, her small rebellion is not limited to the subtle plot to kill Joshua. As was argued in the previous section, Alma's identity is constructed through her body by the gaze of the Other. Therefore her body is actually a way for others to define her. However, that same body also offers a way for Alma to rebel: if her body is what they want, then her body is what they will get, with all that that entails. They can have the whole biological reality of her, with all the blood and odours.

In a sudden trance of concentration the Tattooed Girl worked her fingers into the crotch of her tight-fitting panties and inside the crevice between her legs where the tampon already soaked with blood was jammed. The fingers came away slick with blood, she wiped onto pieces of tender-cooked beef and stirred the beef into the wine-rich sauce. Again, and another time, she thrust her fingers into her body that was knotted with pain and brought them out in this way, in triumph, in her trance of concentration. (234)

Out of the four main characters, three are violent at least occasionally. The one character conspicuously absent from performing acts of violence is Joshua. He is “[t]he world's perfect

victim” (19), because he does not fight back. This is perhaps the reason why he is the recipient of all the hatred in Alma: even she sees him as an easy target. He does not harbour murderous intentions, and the only person he even considers killing, albeit in passing, is himself. However, even his discussion on suicide is purely theoretical: “Seigl liked Seneca on the subject of suicide. *The wise man will live as long as he ought, not as long as he can.* You wanted to die before the matter of dying was taken from you; you wanted to depart before suffering a final, terrible illness.” (68, emphasis in original) Whereas the other characters use violence to solidify their identities in one way or another, Joshua does not need to do so. Joshua only reads about historical violence and writes about the atrocities he imagines his grandparents must have endured, but real violence has no place in his world.

After being subjected to yet another burst of abuse from Dmitri, Alma is relieved it did not escalate into physical violence: “he hadn't hit her it was only words.” (100) Whereas the others use their fists, Joshua uses language instead. This might be because he does not have enemies in the same way as the others. He does not have anyone he could take his anger out at, because his opponents are metaphorical instead of actual physical beings. Like his sister, Joshua has manic episodes, but instead of turning that energy into violence, he channels it into his writing. Instead of constructing his identity with violence, he writes it. Writing is not an alternative to violence as such, because it is not a conscious decision on Joshua's part to use one or the other. However, it does fulfil some of the same functions that violence does for the others. The relationship between writing, language and identity is the topic of the next section.

## 4 Writing identity

In the previous sections, I have studied the construction of identity from the standpoints of cultural studies and psychoanalysis, as well as investigated how violence relates to identity. The overarching theme in these sections has been how identity is constructed in relation to the Other. Particularly in my discussion of cultural studies the idea that identity is a narrative or a fiction, as Stuart Hall has argued, became evident. In this section, I will focus on how literature and language in general are connected to the construction of identity. The relevant theory here is metafiction, which is similar to the other theories I have used in that it also emphasizes the notion that reality is a construction. In this section I will examine what metafictional elements there are in the novel, and what they reveal about the way reality and therefore also identity are constructed. In short, this section is about language, literature, and writing, and how they are used in the construction of identity by different characters. If in the other sections I have analysed how the characters are constructed or construct themselves culturally, as parts of society, in this section I examine how they are written or write themselves.

### 4.1 Identity is a fiction: metafiction in *The Tattooed Girl*

The world depicted in *The Tattooed Girl* is that of literature. It is a novel about reading and writing, and indeed the importance of language in general. In fact, there are copious occasions where it also seems to be fiction about fiction. The most obvious sign of this is that since Joshua is an author, there are long passages in the novel that depict his writing process. In addition, there are also points where a piece of fiction is discussed. The following is only one such example: “In the world you've created we see the shadows of things, not the things themselves. We are forced to imagine what the writer doesn't reveal. We become collaborators in shadows...” (10) Here Essler is explaining his interpretation of *The Shadows* to Joshua. There are thus several discussions about literature, but

particularly telling are the dialogues between Joshua and Alma, because in those are represented two polar opposites: an author and a near illiterate.

“Alma, dear, no. Aharon and Erika are wholly fictitious characters. They were based upon my father's parents, or, rather, my father's memories of his parents as he described them to me, but I never knew those people: they died a quarter-century before I was born. Everything in *The Shadows* is invented except the landscape and certain dates in the history of Germany and the War.”

“Invented.” Alma looked as if suddenly there were a bad taste in her mouth.

Seigl said, “*The Shadows* is a novel, Alma. I'm sure you've read many novels? Even when a novel is 'real,' its subject is its own language.” (251)

When one reads discussions such as the above, one is forced to be reminded that *The Tattooed Girl* is also a piece of fiction. Thus the novel comments on its own status as an artefact, making it useful to analyse the metafictional elements in the novel in more detail.

Metafiction is essentially fiction about fiction, or, as Linda Hutcheon explains it, “fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1986, 1). According to Patricia Waugh, there are many kinds of texts that can be described as metafiction, but “the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (2001, 6). In metafiction, the discourses of literature and literary theory blend together within a fictional text. In Waugh's words, these texts “all explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction” (2001, 2). Metafictional texts are pieces of fiction that underline their own status as artefacts in a self-conscious manner to question the relationship between fiction and reality (ibid). Therefore they “not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (ibid).

Metafiction is most commonly associated with experimental postmodern literature. However, Mika Hallila situates metafiction in a larger context: in the history of the novel as a genre. Although Waugh's focus is mostly on literature from the 1960s and after, she too notes that it would be misleading to discuss metafiction solely in connection with contemporary literature because “although the *term* 'metafiction' might be new, the *practice* is as old (if not older) than the novel itself” (2001, 5, emphases in original). According to Hallila, the novel as a form of literature is

always reflective. Firstly, a novel is reflective in relation to literary tradition, to previous novels. By being part of the literary tradition, any novel reflects its own position within that tradition. Secondly, the novel is self-reflective. Hallila points out that there has always been a self-reflective level in novels throughout the ages, for example when there are references to when the story is told or when there are reminders to the reader that the story is made up. (2004, 209)

Waugh's theory on metafiction focuses on the relationship between reality and fiction. She argues that the way we perceive reality or history has changed, and they are “no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures” (2001, 7). According to Waugh, this also explains why metafiction gained such a foothold as a part of a broader cultural movement known as postmodernism. It connected with “a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world” (2001, 3). Waugh points out that there is “a greater awareness within contemporary culture of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday 'reality’” (2001, 3). Therefore, she argues, literary fiction with its worlds created with nothing but language becomes a good model of the construction of reality itself (ibid). As Waugh writes, “[i]n showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written’” (2001, 18–19). In essence, an objective “reality” does not exist, only people's perceptions of it, and these perceptions are mediated through language. If “reality” is fiction, then it follows that identity is as well. In the rest of this section, I will examine to what extent the characters are able to write their own identity, so to speak. Are they able to create their own identity or are they instead forced to act a part that has been given to them? I will also examine the role of language in this: is it limiting or empowering?

For Joshua, writing and literature are perhaps the most important part in his identity. As he is an author, they form his professional identity. They are also his way of expressing himself to others as well as substantial building blocks in his world view, as can be seen from his numerous references to literary people or occurrences. He is constantly comparing reality to fiction. As I have

argued in previous sections, there are various ways in which other people (Jet especially) try to affect his identity. Writing, on the other hand, is something he is in charge of. However, the same issues that plague Joshua in his real life follow him to his writing as well, particularly the question of how much he can construct himself and how much he is constructed by others. There are hints that he feels he lacks control of his life. For example, in the chapters that are told from his perspective there are often comments about him as if he could disappear any second now, like a character in a fictional story. He only exists in other people's stories: "At such times she was oblivious of Seigl as if he had no existence. Almost, he was made to wonder if he'd drifted into a stranger's dream: if Alma Busch suddenly wakened, he would vanish." (221) Another example is when he meets Essler: "He means to write about me. He'd devour me alive." (12) Again, there is this imagery of disappearing, like his existence is somehow fleeting. As an author, he should be writing his stories about himself rather than be a character in other people's narratives.

In a way, he has quite literally written his own identity, or at least one aspect of it, because he has created an image for himself as a successful author. However, this very image becomes a problem for him, because there comes a point when his self-constructed image is no longer under his own control, but rather becomes a predefined box that people expect him to stay in. Therefore there is a constant struggle to maintain that image, to be that which others perceive him to be. I have already touched upon this idea in section 3.1.1, where I discussed the divide between what he is in private and what he is in public. However, the struggle to maintain his image is not limited to his public appearances, but it also dictates what he writes. There is a certain creative level he has to maintain, and not everything he writes is meant for outsider's eyes: "They were to be seen by no one but Seigl. Discovered by others in Seigl's wake, on the floor for instance, such notes were rarely comprehensible. They were small, somehow shameful indulgences." (83) His private self and public self are kept separate. He censors himself to such an extent that it becomes an obstacle in his career: "Until the other day it hadn't occurred to Seigl that the chief impediment of his work-life had

been for years this idiotic vision of him in others' eyes as a 'genius'." (85) Although writing began as self-expression for him, at some point it turned into a way for other people to categorize him.

Likely due to this self-censorship, in the years after the release of his novel he has concentrated on translations instead of writing original fiction. In essence, he has stopped telling stories of his own. Jet is particularly unimpressed with his decision. Rather than seeing translation as a valid activity, she believes it is a coward's choice: "And you, hiding in here, translating Virgil" (138). He should be writing a sequel to *The Shadows* about their shared family history, thus in effect inventing their identities, but is too scared to do so. In her view, his talent means he has a moral obligation to write original fiction, since anything else is a waste of his talent: "Anyone can translate some old Greek – Latin? – poem! But not anyone can write a sequel to *The Shadows*." (120) As a writer of considerable ability, he has an unavoidable duty which it would be churlish of him not to fulfil.

The idea that Joshua is hiding from something emerges several times in the novel. I have discussed Jet's play-acting in previous sections, as well as Joshua's negative opinion of it. However, he is doing much the same himself, only in reverse: instead of projecting a made up identity onto others the way Jet does, he attempts to draw no attention whatsoever. Jet notes that this strategy has paid off in the past: "You've been hiding behind sarcasm and intellectual bullshit since childhood. The world rewards you for it. Sure." (133) Even though Joshua accuses Jet of being fake, he has not been quite honest about himself either. All this hiding has not been without consequence, however: it has left him feeling insubstantial:

(For Seigl, desperate not to be found out, just yet, by the community, still more by his relatives, had become inordinately secretive. He'd never shared secrets readily, kept his private life private, but now he was becoming parenthetical: he felt like an eclipsed moon. He was still there, but you couldn't see him.) (69)

In addition, his hiding has meant that he has not asserted himself as strongly as Jet, for example. Therefore his passivity has left room for others to make their own assumptions about him. This is noted by Jet: "Yes, but you so rarely tell the truth, Josh. You're like an enigmatic character in a play. I have to read between your lines, and you're so sparing with your lines." (115)

For much of the novel, Joshua is noticeably passive, especially compared to Jet. He contents himself with working on his translations and avoiding attention. However, this changes when his illness progresses and mania sets in. Both Jet and Joshua undergo manic episodes, which offer them ways to define their identities, albeit their self-definitions actualize in vastly different ways. As I discussed in the previous section, Jet turns to violence when she is manic. She feels a threat to her identity and responds to that threat with violence. Joshua, on the other hand, grabs a pen instead of a knife. His illness and the mania that follows it during remission act as a catalyst for him to start writing again:

He'd abandoned his novel-fragment *Redemption*, quite the strangest thing he'd ever attempted, a bizarre future-set parable Seigl scarcely recognized as his own writing, but he had been stimulated by the experience of writing fiction again, working so intensely inside his imagination, and was thinking he might try again, in a more realistic setting. (239)

I do not wish to suggest that he needs the mania in order to be creative, merely that it affords him the possibility to forget the debilitating expectations that have been levelled at him. Even though what he manages to write in his delirious state is for the most part outlandish nonsense, the act of writing forces him out of the lull he has been before that. Whereas earlier he has been idly unhappy in the role he finds himself in, now he is taking a more active role. This is evident in the kind of fiction he now begins to write: “He'd set aside the Virgil translations. Temporarily. He was working on poetry of his own, and on a new novel set in the future where all times were contemporaneous, simultaneous.” (171) Whereas earlier he has been compared to a character in someone else's text, he is now asserting his authorship over his own life. Waugh argues that the fundamental assumption of metafiction is that “composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's own 'reality'” (2001, 21). This basically sums up Joshua: when he is finally able to start creating fiction, he is also able to start creating himself. Most importantly, he feels like himself, and realises the folly of before:

This past winter he'd let many things slide, he'd been distracted and *not himself* as the expression has it.  
*If not myself then who am I?*  
*The lies we tell. Even to ourselves.* (216, emphases in original)

Joshua thus relies on literature, writing and language in defining who he is. Fiction is a central site for the expression of identity for him. In the next section I will discuss how language, literature and writing relate to Alma, who approaches these issues from a vastly different standpoint than Joshua.

#### **4.2 Literal-minded Alma and literature**

Hutcheon argues that the reader has to share with the writer certain social, literary, linguistic and other such codes so that they can understand the language of fiction (1986, 29). She continues that metafictional texts use the characters and plot to explore “the inadequacy of language in conveying feeling, in communicating thought, or even fact” (ibid). This is essentially what *The Tattooed Girl* does, since language is in the forefront in the relationship between Alma and Joshua in particular. The novel is to some extent an examination of the communication breakdown between Alma and Joshua: even though they are both native English speakers, their vastly different backgrounds cause many misunderstandings between them. The vocabulary and other components of the language are the same, but the way they use language is not.

Unlike Joshua, who is an author and therefore by definition a wordsmith, someone who knows how to manipulate language and words in order to get across the meaning he wants, Alma's grasp on the finer points of language is not nearly as masterful. This is noted by the manager of the Book Seller, as well, who ridicules her lack of knowledge on words: “the man said in a voice heavy with sarcasm, 'Consignment? Don't know what consignment means? There're dictionaries all over this place.’” (72) However, not only does she not know the meaning of some words, she is not particularly interested in finding out either:

[I]t intrigued him to witness an individual for whom print had little attraction or charm, which was wholly unlike Seigl or anyone close to him. Though words sometimes puzzled Alma, she never looked up any word in any dictionary; a word was like a pebble to be turned briefly in the hand, and tossed away, with no expectation that it would be encountered again. (224)

Therefore when she is working at the Book Seller, she finds herself in a situation she is very much

unsuited to. The same can be said when she begins working for Joshua. She keeps finding herself in situations where she is the underdog.

Language is not something Alma has much control over, but rather something that is forced upon her. This is literally the case with her tattoos, as there are various occasions when they are referred to as resembling language. In fact, Dmitri makes the connection between the tattoos and language the very first time he sees her: “the girl's forearms and the backs of her hands were finely marked as with calligraphy, or embroidery” (26) and again just a few lines after that: “If these were tattoos, they weren't very vivid or emphatic; they looked more like a miniature language.” (26) If they do resemble language, that would seem to suggest that whoever tattooed her must have had some idea on what they mean. After all, in order for them to resemble writing in any way, they must have some inherent logic. Alma, however, does not know how to make sense of them. She is carrying language on her skin, yet she is not able to make out the meaning of it. There is yet another mention of these tattoos a little later in the same chapter, still from Dmitri's point of view: “the crude tattoos like cobwebs sticking to her skin. Like graffiti, or drunken speech.” (30) The term “graffiti” emphasizes the fact that when these tattoos were made, Alma was merely a convenient canvas for them. The perpetrator has used his own language to mark her.

Alma's inclination to take what is said word for word is mentioned several times. These mentions are typically found in the chapters that are told from Joshua's perspective, because they denote an important difference between Joshua and Alma. Joshua is baffled by the way Alma thinks, because it is the very opposite of his own way. As an author, Joshua is used to using figures of speech and imaginative language, whereas Alma most often only derives the literal meaning of a given piece of language. OED says the following of the word “literal” when it is used of a person or the mind: “apt to take words literally; characterized by an inability to recognize metaphor or understand humorous exaggeration, irony, or the like; lacking imagination; prosaic, literal-minded.” Therefore this is yet another way in which Joshua and Alma are opposites. Her literal-mindedness

also puts her at a disadvantage, because she misses some rather important aspects of human communication.

She also occasionally struggles to decipher body language: “Alma smiled, slightly taken aback by Seigl's manner. She didn't know how to read him, Seigl supposed.” (76) Here the verb “read” is used in a metaphorical sense, equating people's actions to language. The underlying idiom here is “to read someone like a book”, which *The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* defines as the ability “to understand someone's thoughts and motives clearly or easily”. The indication is therefore that people are “written” and a code is needed in order to understand what is communicated. Tellingly, this quote comes from a chapter that is told from Joshua's point of view: he makes the connection between Alma struggling to read people in the same way as she struggles to read physical texts. Joshua, an author, is able to use this kind of metaphor, because he sees a connection between reality and fiction. Reality is written, just like a book.

The inability to understand figurative language as well as body language is not the only challenge Alma is faced with in terms of language comprehension: she also has difficulty discerning written texts. Her poor literacy is clear to Joshua, who notices that she “read (he'd seen her!) by moving her lips and often drew her forefinger along a line of print, like a slow but diligent child” (165). She is evidently not a fluent reader, as tracking the words with a finger is usually what children do when they are learning to read. Reading is not the only mental process in which she uses her fingers as an aid: she does the same when confronting numerical issues: “Seigl asked Alma how long she'd been working in the Book Seller, and Alma lifted a hand and moved the fingers in silent counting. What a literal mind! Clearly, Alma meant to be exact.” (77) This is not a single occurrence, not only this one question she wishes to answer in an exact manner. She does the same when she tries to work out a number on her own: “He hadn't touched her in how many days, she tried to count on her fingers and gave up” (98). She turns mental processes into physical ones, apparently needing actual physical representations in order to deal with abstract notions such as numbers.

Hutcheon's theory on metafiction emphasizes the role of the reader in creating a meaning for a text. She argues that there are certain things that are expected of the reader:

Reading and writing belong to the processes of “life” as much as they do to those of “art.” It is this realization that constitutes one side of the paradox of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the “art,” of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be *part* of his life experience. (1986, 5, emphasis in original)

In other words, the reader is forced to become aware of his own role as the one who gives meaning to the text. However, this applies to literature in general as well, not only to metafictional texts. There is a certain code that is required to understand fiction. One aspect of this code is that in order to appreciate or even comprehend literature one needs to be able to discern the difference between figurative and literal meaning. Alma, in all her literal-mindedness, is unable to do so. Therefore she also struggles to understand the difference between reality and fiction, because she takes fictional texts at face value. She also lacks critical thinking, and has a tendency to believe what she is told, if the person telling her something is in a position of power. For example, her hatred of Jews is mainly based on her father's views. Similarly she has been taught the Bible is literally true, and she has not questioned it until Joshua breaks the news to her:

“You read the Bible, don't you? Your ministers preach from the Bible, don't they? The Bible is hardly 'real.’”  
Stony-faced Alma stood blinking at him. The horror struck Seigl, she believed the Bible was *real*? (252, emphasis in original)

Some of this is inevitably due to her lack of proper education, which is evidenced by the fact that she is especially easily confused by literature: “*Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live': A History of European Witchcraft* – and she wondered, were these things real? Had there been real witches? Or was it all made up, like in a movie?” (78) This example points out that her assumption on what is real and what is not is based on the medium used. It is more difficult for her to make out what is fact or fiction when it is expressed in written form. Printed words have more weight for her, presumably because literature is a stranger medium for her than films. In addition, it is easier to realise films are fictitious, because the same actors appear in different roles in different films.

Mikita Brottman notes that what differentiates reading from visual forms of narrative such as television and films is the fact that there are no pictures connected to the words, “allowing you, the reader, to exercise your imagination, to transcend ordinary possibilities, to be 'carried away' somewhere remote for your own place and time, to escape from your own personality” (2008, 12). Because of this power that literature can have to free people's minds, Brottman argues, reading has in various points in history been considered “bad for you” (2008, 8). It has even caused trepidation in those unable to parse the code, seeming unnecessarily cryptic for ordinary non-readers, “who, imagining these bibliomancers sitting silently with their volumes of spells, symbols, and formulae, probably wondered what on earth they were doing that needed to be hidden from the world of decent, honest folk with no use for codes or cipher” (2008, 9).

Although Alma can read written language to some extent and understand its basic meaning, she does not have the code required to understand fiction. Because she takes literature at face value, she also believes that if what is written is not strictly real, it must be a lie. She cannot tell what is fiction and what is reality, and it follows she does not make a difference between invention and lying:

Alma said, “What happened to somebody else, you have a right to pretend it was you?”  
 “Of course I have a 'right,' Alma. And so do you.”  
 “To lie about who I am? My name? What happened to me?”  
 “Not to lie. I meant, to invent: if you were writing fiction.” (251)

Because she is so firmly rooted in reality, she lacks imagination. She only sees reality as it is, not as it could be. Similarly she sees herself as she is, not as she could be. This prevents her from writing her own identity, as it were, because deviating from current reality would be a lie. The lack of imagination also means that she has no story to tell, as Joshua notes: “Seigl waited for her to say more. But what was there for his literal-minded assistant from somewhere in western Pennsylvania to say?” (244) The lack of voice on Alma's part is reflected in the structure of the novel as well: of the 307 pages of the novel less than a third can be said to be from Alma's perspective. Even though she gives the novel its name, she is not heard. She is not allowed to define herself, but instead her story is told by others.

### 4.3 The importance of names

One way of using language to define one's own identity is through naming, which is yet another notable difference between Alma and Jet: Alma is called the Tattooed Girl whether she likes it or not, whereas Jet names herself. For Jet, self-naming is one way of taking authorship of her own life: “Jet was self-named: 'Jet Steadman-Seigl.' In fact, she'd been baptized in their mother's Presbyterian church as 'Mary Beth Seigl.' But this bland name lacked the manic glamor of 'Jet Steadman-Seigl' and had to be cast off.” (7) If reality is fiction, then self-naming is like taking on a pseudonym. As I discussed earlier in section 3.1.1, in Jet's case one significant aspect of her self-naming is to both identify herself with her Jewish heritage as well as to project that Jewish identity onto others. However, it is also her way of taking control of her own personal identity. Not content with choosing an ordinary Jewish name to reflect her cultural heritage, she chooses a “glamorous” name. OED defines “glamour” as “[a] magical or fictitious beauty attaching to any person or object; a delusive or alluring charm”, which characterizes her assumed name aptly. She goes from having an ordinary appellation to a name that in all likelihood no one else has, thereby making her stand out from the crowd and making her seem special.

Jean Starobinski writes on the importance of names: “A name awaits us before we are born. It was there before we ever knew it, like our bodies. A common illusion is to believe that our destinies and truths are inscribed in our names.” (1989, 79) We are given a name even before we understand what that means. We have no say in the naming process. Jet, however, has claimed authority on her own name and thus on her own identity. Even though Jet is the one who emphasizes the importance of family, history and heritage, she changes the name that has been given to her by her parents, because there is power in defining oneself. Again, to quote Starobinski:

The use of a pseudonym is therefore a way of declaring independence not simply from one's social and family background but from other people generally. Our identities, which bind us to our names, also deliver us as hostages to alien consciousness. They leave us defenseless in the face of public judgment. The egotist seeks to regain possession of himself. He destroys the name that leaves him feeling vulnerable in the part of himself that reflects the onlooker's gaze. (1989, 81)

Starobinski argues that taking on a pseudonym is a way of deliberately altering human relations and

shaping appearances (1989, 78). Jet assumes the “attack is the best defence” policy: she deliberately chooses a provocative name for herself: “At twenty-one, Jet legally changed her name to 'Jetimah Steadman-Seigl.' There was a time when she spoke provocatively of herself as a 'Jewess.' It gave her power, she claimed: the power of inverted Jew-hatred.” (117) Jet's self-naming is on one hand a challenge to others, an attempt to cause offence, but also an act of defence, undermining possible criticism or prejudice before it even happens.

Oates herself has changed her name in the course of her literary career, taking on two different pseudonyms. When her first disguise as Rosamund Smith was revealed in the press in 1987, it caused some controversy, forcing her to explain herself. “I wanted to escape from my own identity,” she was quoted as saying in a *New York Times* article at the time. This introduces another feature of self-naming: instead of a way to construct a new identity like Jet did, it can also be a way to hide one's past. For Oates, taking on a pseudonym was a way to escape the expectations that her body of work necessarily puts on any new text she publishes. There are hints in the novel that Dmitri has changed his name: “Dmitri as he was known at The Café. Possibly this was his real name, though probably, frequent patrons of The Café thought, not. His last name was Meatte. There was no romance or mystery to Meatte.” (23) If Dmitri has indeed changed his name, he would have had practical reasons for it. He is a petty criminal, and has perhaps changed his name in order to improve his chances of getting a job. Therefore the name change is a way of starting anew, like an author who assumes a pseudonym. There is also a noticeable difference in Jet's and Dmitri's names: whereas Jetimah Steadman-Seigl is glamorous, Meatte lacks romance or mystery, implying there is nothing extraordinary about it. The former invites attention, the latter deflects it.

Unlike Dmitri and Jet, Alma does not name herself, but is instead given a name by others. In fact, she is often not referred to by her actual name at all, but instead as the Tattooed Girl. At first it is understandable: she has just arrived in the city, so people simply do not know her name and therefore have to refer to her by appearance. However, this practice continues even after her actual name is already known: “The Tattooed Girl, as she would be called by some observers, began to be

noticed along Mount Carmel Avenue in the fall of the year. Her first name was known to be 'Alma' and for some time she had no last name.” (21) This is particularly conspicuous in the chapters that are told from Dmitri's point of view. One would assume that her sort-of-boyfriend would think of her as “Alma,” not as “the Tattooed Girl.” This reveals that Dmitri thinks Alma is inferior to him, not even worthy of a proper name. This view is supported by G. W. Kennedy, who argues that “the most striking way in which language is turned into an instrument of exploitation is by the very antithesis of self-naming – the aggressive forcing of arbitrary names or definitions by one person upon another” (1973, 171). The individual is thus “forced to 'swallow' an arbitrary name unilaterally formulated on the egotistical authority of another” (ibid).

Alma is thus referred to either by her first name or as the Tattooed Girl, but not many people know her last name. In fact, it is mentioned several times that she appears to not have one. She is merely “the Tattooed Girl with no last name” (61). In modern Western society, mononymity is usually reserved for celebrities who are so well known that no surname is needed to differentiate them from anyone else. For ordinary people, on the other hand, surnames are a way of showing relation to one's family, and thus conveying identity and heritage. In other words, surnames show where we come from. This might be one explanation for why Alma's last name is hardly mentioned: she has left her home and family behind and does not readily divulge details about her past. Therefore it could be seen as a conscious decision on her part to hide her old identity like Dmitri has (likely) done. However, I would argue that her lack of a last name is rather a sign of her insignificance in the view of others. Others do not know her surname, nor do they care to. Alma herself does not volunteer the information until she needs to. To all intents and purposes, it is “[a]s if she had no surname. Or her surname wasn't important, as Alma herself wasn't important.” (76)

As I have argued in previous sections, the level of agency among the characters differs greatly. This shows even in the names of the characters: some have freely chosen names for themselves, whereas others have them imposed upon them. They also have different roles in the construction of their own identity, as others are to varying degrees authors of their own identities,

and Alma is more of an actor in a play, following a script she has been given. Although Joshua also struggles to define himself, he does in the end manage to do so through writing. Alma, however, is not able to do so. If anything, language is yet another aspect in her life that emphasizes how little control she has over her own life. She lacks the resources to write her own identity: “She had no paper, and she had no pen. While the voice continued to speak, she hung up the phone.” (301)

## 5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analysed the different ways in which identities are constructed in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Tattooed Girl*. I have emphasized the role of the Other in this construction. In fact, Otherness has proved to have such a pivotal function that if it does not exist, it is created. This has been evident in the way a Jewish identity is attached to Joshua, even though he does not himself identify as Jewish. This has raised my main research question, which is whether or not it is possible to define oneself or does outside influence overrule all attempts at self-determination.

The role of the Other is different in the two theoretical approaches that I have mainly used, namely Stuart Hall's and Amartya Sen's ideas as well as Lacan's idea of the gaze of the Other. Therefore the process involved in the construction of identity is also if not contradictory then at least contrasting. However, both of these theoretical approaches show that the ability to determine oneself is directly proportional to the level of agency the individual has over all. Yet no amount of agency makes it possible to ignore other people's perceptions completely. As Kwame Anthony Appiah expresses it, "what I appear to be is fundamentally how I appear to others and only derivatively how I appear to myself" (Frith 1996, 125).

The levels of agency the characters in the novel have vary considerably. The one who seems most in control of both her image and identity is Jet. Her identity is a performance, which is to a significant extent her own invention. Even though her new identity relies heavily on her brother, she has nevertheless been instrumental in defining herself. She projects this very carefully constructed image to others in a very deliberate way, attempting to not only influence the way others perceive her but in so doing shape the way she sees herself. Although Joshua accuses her of playing a role, she is actually constructing herself through her actions. As Joshua himself comments, "a face can take on the contours of the mask pressed against it" (115). The question of inauthenticity is raised several times in the novel, in situations when an individual's behaviour differs noticeably from the perception others have of them. For example, Dmitri is suspicious of Joshua when he acts against a

Jewish stereotype. Similarly, Jet believes Joshua is acting against his real self, simply because he does not embrace the role she has devised for him. Therefore, the moment someone dares deviate from the public perception of themselves, they are confronted with accusations that they are not being true to themselves.

Even though other people always influence the way an individual's identity is constructed, nowhere is this more evident in *The Tattooed Girl* than with the Tattooed Girl. Alma is the polar opposite of Jet, because she has nearly no agency. There are several reasons as to why Alma is not able to define herself as much as the others. Perhaps the most important reason is the fact that she has been oppressed her entire life, so her position in relation to others has been ingrained in her mind. She ends in situations and relationships that force her to rescind control of herself. In addition, she cannot envision herself as anything else than what she is because she lacks creativity. As Simon Frith says, "the self is always an imagined self" (1996, 109). Therefore a certain amount of imagination and creativity is necessary in the construction of one's identity.

Then again, using too much imagination also comes across as fake. As Amartya Sen argues, although there is room for people to choose their own identities, they must do so within some limits. However, even someone like Jet does need to include other people in the process that is the construction of identity. In light of this constant battle between an individual and their surrounding society, it becomes clear why there is so much violence in Oates' novels. For one, it is ingrained in collective consciousness that violence is acceptable. As I have argued, violence has had a significant role in the development of American society throughout the centuries, and has, in fact, been employed in the construction of American national identity. The collective acceptance of violence as well as the history of it therefore mean that violence is an easy solution, especially for an individual who feels socially impotent. For a character like Alma, it is not only an easy solution but seemingly the only one. She might not be able to influence what others think of her, but anyone is capable of violence.

As I have mentioned, Joshua is the only main character in the novel who does not resort to violence. In fact, that thought does not even cross his mind. I would argue that this is due to his rather more solid view of himself than what the others have. Even though there is substantial pressure directed at him to be a certain way, to fulfil the role others have created for him, he is largely able to resist this outside influence. However, this is not to say that he is totally impervious to the influence. This is made evident by the problems he has with writing: the forum which he has used to express his identity turns into a challenge for him, since writing fiction would mean he has to reveal himself. This in turn might lead to a public realisation that he is in fact not the literary genius he has been believed to be.

In conclusion, I would argue that *The Tattooed Girl* offers quite a bleak response to the question of whether or not an individual can define themselves. Both Joshua and Alma encounter severe challenges when it comes to the construction of identity, and in Alma's case these challenges prove to be almost insurmountable. Lest there be any remaining hope that there might be a happy ending after all, Oates kills off both Joshua and Alma, and in rather melodramatic fashion at that. When at last Alma and Joshua overcome their differences, find some common ground and Alma's murderous fantasies come to an end, Joshua falls to his death. Despite being devastated by his death, Alma begins to be able to imagine a future without him and considers a career as a nurse. This is a significant step for her as an autonomous subject, since up until that point she has found her self-worth only in relation to someone else. The future therefore looks surprisingly promising for her. Yet Joshua's analogy between Alma and Virgil's Dido was foreshadowing, as like Dido's, her life ends on a blade. Historical forces shape people's lives, not personal choices. Jet's determinism, her notion that our lives are preordained and that one cannot escape one's destiny is the world view that prevails in the end: "It's over. There's justice now." (307)

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