

**GLAMOUR WAVES: THE GOTHIC STORY  
OF MARILYN MONROE  
AS TOLD BY JOYCE CAROL OATES IN *BLONDE***

**ALEXANDRU BUDAC**

West University of Timișoara

***Abstract:** So much has been written about Marilyn Monroe that it seems impossible to break new ground regarding either her iconic persona or her sad life. However, Joyce Carol Oates draws on a vast biographical material, but also on Gothic tropes in order to make Marilyn Monroe a literary character in her own right. My paper tackles the way Oates' novel mends the split between the real person and the actress' onscreen charisma and assesses the significance of blondness – epitomized by the famous "glamour waves" haircut – in Monroe's rise to stardom.*

***Keywords:** biographical novel, Marilyn Monroe, Joyce Carol Oates, popular culture, women in Hollywood*

**1. Introduction: the silver screen and the literary mirror**

Writing about Marilyn Monroe seems either utterly redundant or an ethical necessity. So much has been said and written about her, and since the '50s, she has become so conspicuous in the visual arts and popular culture, that everybody has their own perspective on her. However, assessing Monroe's public persona is not at par with properly understanding her personality or illuminating the problematic aspects of her sad life. By writing about Marilyn Monroe, many a biographer and film critic have tried to crack an enigma. To what degree was she a victim of the Hollywood industry and how should one relate her untimely death to the history of mental illnesses in her family and her own self-destructive proclivities? How good was she really as an actress? And perhaps the most important question, what was she like? Wendy Lesser notices that sorting through the whole material the actress' career has spawned over decades, one comes out in the end empty handed: "the closer you look at Marilyn Monroe, the harder it is to see her." (Lesser 1991: 193) Lesser (1991: 194-195) adds that an act of cruelty is inherent in every attempt to write about her, because, in Monroe's case, it is almost impossible to separate the person from the movie star and because "being looked at was Marilyn Monroe's essential gesture, her defining role."

Joyce Carol Oates tackles an even more risky approach. She makes Marilyn Monroe the main character of her most ambitious novel to date, *Blonde* (2000). Oates wants us to read the life of such a complicated celebrity as fiction. As she underscores in an interview, "to call it 'non-fiction' would be misleading." (Johnson, Oates 2001: 17) She imagines Marilyn Monroe as a lovable Emma

Bovary and sets her life story on an epic scale (idem: 15-16). The mood of the novel is settled by Joyce Carol Oates' choice of the first person posthumous narrative. This artistic option highlights the unreliable storyteller and also turns *Blonde* into an allegory of sorts. Is it an allegory about Marilyn Monroe? About America? About the way Hollywood – old and new alike – represents women and treats its actresses? We hear not only Marilyn Monroe's voice in the book, but a whole chorus: family members, friends, lovers, ex-husbands, producers, directors, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) informers – there is even an FBI file on her name slipped between the pages –, one of President Kennedy's secret servicemen, and many others.

Moreover, Oates designs Marilyn Monroe's life as a gothic story, a genre with whose conventions she has played convincingly during her prolific writing career. Actually, she turns the glamour we are used to associate with Marilyn Monroe's image into the blinding light that reveals the horrors inside a vampire's castle. Except that this time, the only reality is the reflected one, which everybody around feeds upon. Oates has Marilyn say:

Never did I experience my face and body from the inside (where there was numbness like sleep), only through the mirror, where there was sharpness and clarity. In that way I could see myself. (Oates 2020: 30)

By employing well established topoi such as light and darkness, angelic innocence and ogreish lust, sensual reverie and graphic physiological afflictions, glamorous appearance and major depression, Joyce Carol Oates tries to endow Marilyn Monroe with the features of a classical novel heroine. But is antithesis enough when it comes to grasping such an elusive personality?

## 2. Golden Aphrodite

In the beginning, she is curly-haired Norma Jeane Baker – Oates uses this spelling of her middle name –, a California girl from the land of fire, sun, and sand, who takes movies for reality: she is made to believe that her unknown father might be a famous actor – Clark Gable perhaps, or maybe Charlie Chaplin –, she sees the stars' mansions in Beverly Hills and Los Feliz as fairy tale castles, her dreams borrow the colours of the glossy posters advertising beautiful women and men she stares at near the entrance of the Egyptian Theatre. As a consequence, little Norma Jeane is fond of her blond doll with pink ribbons. However, this sunny childhood is nothing but another California mirage. Her mother, Gladys, whom Joyce Carol Oates imagines as a fading and alcoholic former actress – the real Gladys Mortensen was a negative cutter (Miller 2000) – suffers from paranoid schizophrenia and is prone to frightening fits of violent behaviour. One might say that Norma Jeane's early childhood resembles that of Stephen King's *Carrie* (2011) – especially after Gladys tries to drown her daughter in a hot bath – and that her becoming a ward at the Los Angeles Orphans Home Society after Gladys was taken to a psychiatric hospital might have been Norma Jeane's luck. She was an orphan with both her parents alive, actually.

Wendy Lesser (1991: 199) assesses the strong hold the image of the orphan – “the pathetic Dickensian victim” – has on our imagination, and the degree to which literature feeds fantasies about misplaced identities, but also shapes the myth of Marilyn Monroe as the pauper turned princess:

The orphan is someone who needs to be taken care of, as men – in life and in the movies – were offering to take care of Marilyn. The orphan is an eternal child [...], as Marilyn in some sense appeared to be. But the orphan is also a positive, Huckleberry-Finn-like image of freedom and self-creation. [...] The alternate orphan fantasy, the victorious, rather than pathetic one, is the dream of not belonging to one's own family, of being aristocracy misplaced. (Lesser 1991: 199-200)

Joyce Carol Oates also draws on this pervasive myth. After she is placed in the care of an adoptive family, Oates's Norma Jeane becomes Lolita to her foster father, Warren Pirig, and Red Riding Hood to all kinds of wolfish men, some much older than her; an underage bride for Bucky Glazer – a character reminiscent, but at the same time distinct from the real first husband, James Dougherty – who works as an embalmer and is the first to turn Norma Jeane into his pinup, using makeup taken from the funeral home in order to boastfully expose his young wife's nakedness to his pals; and a model for more or less sleazy photographers during the war. All these men are after her body which their eyes slice and inspect one part at the time. Norma Jeane wants to be a good wife to Bucky instead – she tenderly and incestuously calls him “Big Daddy” – and to be loved by everyone. Because the reader knows from the very beginning how the things will evolve, the whole literary setting is lit up in order to receive the future star who is unaware of her mesmerized audience. In this way, what we know about the real Marilyn Monroe, what her many lovers see when they date Norma Jeane, and what the character of the famous Marilyn remembers about her passion for movies become indistinct:

They took her on drives along the coastal highway as far north sometimes as Santa Barbara and as far south as Oceanside. They took her on romantic drives by moonlight, the Pacific Ocean luminous to one side and dark wooded hills on the other and the wind rippling her hair and sparks from the driver's cigarettes flying back into the night, but in later years she would confuse these drives with scenes from movies she'd seen or believed she must have seen. (Oates 2020: 112-113)

Joyce Carol Oates' designs are rather explicit, yet efficient only if one concedes that what we know about Marilyn Monroe is akin to a history of both men and women looking incessantly at her. It happens as often as not that the viewer projects on Marilyn Monroe her or his desires, expectations, and misconceptions, such as blondness (she was not a natural blonde), an implicit lack of education (she was a hard-working self-taught) or the sway of the hips responsible for her alluring walk. The latter is not sheer exhibitionism, as one might conclude just by watching the movies and the photo sessions on the red carpet:

In *Timebends*, Arthur Miller says of her well-known hip swivel, “It was, in fact, her natural walk: her footprints on a beach would be in a straight line, the heel descending exactly before the last toepoint.” Hers was, in fact, the walk of a tightrope artist – someone who knew that a fall was imminent, and that the medium she moved through was not intended to support a human being. (Lesser 1991: 209)

In California, an old tenet of classical Athens, which brings together physical beauty, aristocracy, axiology, and power, seems to resurface anew – “[...] in movie logic, aesthetics has the authority of ethics: to be less than beautiful is sad, but to be willfully less than beautiful is immoral” (Oates 2020: 91) – with the difference that at Hollywood there is no metaphysics beyond the appearances.

There is only glitz and desire. Once she peroxides her hair in order to make an appropriate debut, Mr Z, the producer modelled on the famous mogul Darryl F. Zanuck, cannot remember the young actress' name, yet refers to Norma Jeane Baker as "that blonde looking like a tramp." (idem: 209) As soon as she becomes Marilyn Monroe – Oates rolls the syllables in her character's mouth for almost a page until the reader grasps the "sexy murmurous sound" of the stage name (idem: 216-217), – her looks as the dollish woman come into everybody's focus. Otto Össe, the photographer who took her nude shot during the late '40s for the "Miss Golden Dreams" pinup calendar – the same photo that the *Playboy* magazine would buy a few years later, when Marilyn Monroe was rising to fame, igniting thus a national scandal – broods over the time he met her: "Her problem wasn't she was a dumb blonde, it was she wasn't a blonde and she wasn't dumb." (idem: 232)

While doing the screen tests for the part of Angela in *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), her first important role, albeit a minor one, the scared platinum blonde "with an exquisite body in shimmering white rayon", who is not able to talk except in a whisper (idem: 240), surprises the director John Houston – he even forgets to light his cigar while watching her – by revealing herself as a well-read person and able to brilliantly explain the psychology of her character. In her autobiography co-written with Ben Hecht, Marilyn Monroe (2007: 111) remembers preparing that part for several days before the audition, the nervousness that paralyzed her and the men laughing around apparently without reason, the moment she chose to play Angela's role stretching on the floor, but she also remembers John Houston's professionalism and the fact that, unlike Zanuck, "he did not believe that actresses shouldn't be allowed to know what they were going to act in." (ibid.) I suppose that Oates used that impression in order to make the character of John Houston one of the most humane male figures in her novel.

Marilyn Monroe appears on screen only for about ninety seconds, enough for Houston to develop "much of the rest of the movie around the *idea* of women like Marilyn, sexy women whom men think exist to be looked at." (Lesser 1991: 218) There is a Freudian touch in Monroe's cinematic persona, a motif Joyce Carol Oates is aware of – a copy of *The Interpretation of Dreams* with pages blotched from the hydrogen peroxide used in the makeup cabin gets mentioned in the novel (Oates 2020: 313). From *The Asphalt Jungle* onward, Marilyn Monroe "is almost always shown with a 'sugar daddy', a man old enough to be her father, but functioning as her illicit or aspiring lover." (Lesser 1991: 201) The same is true of her 1953 role in *Niagara*, the *film noir* that raised her to stardom, where she plays Rose Loomis, a *femme fatale* who plots her husband's killing.

The movie opens with George Loomis (Joseph Cotten), a Korean War veteran, talking to himself near Niagara Falls in a spurt of rainbow colours. We see the same multicoloured shimmering when he returns to his tourist cabin, where Rose pretends to be asleep, walking through sprinklers. Pondering on the chromatic suggestions – the lodgings bear the name "Rainbow Cabins" – Wendy Lesser connects the rainbow with Marilyn Monroe and dreaming, something that Marilyn was not prone to do in her real life, marred by alcohol and sleeping pills:

It's [the rainbow] a real thing of beauty that has no solid reality, and yet it's one of the strongest positive images in mythical thinking: fairy tales place their pot of gold at the end of it. It's a perfect emblem for Marilyn Monroe. (Lesser 1991: 206-207)

In *Blonde* one learns about the competing theories from the *Niagara* set. One was that the female lead could not act and that in Rose Loomis she was playing

herself actually. The other one implied that she was pure talent, a born actress (Oates 2020: 328). Along with *The Misfits* (1961), Monroe's last completed motion picture, *Niagara* remains still one of her most appreciated performances by the critics.

The movie caused a stir at that time due to its risqué scenes and the rumours – which turned out to be true – that Marilyn Monroe was naked under the sheets. The promotional poster advertised her curvaceous body as landscape sheathed by rushing water (Miklitsch 2016). She sings her alluring song, “Kiss”, like a siren in a hot-pink dress. It is the song that, later in the movie, the Rainbow Tower Carillon bells should play in order to signal her husband's death. *Niagara* is a movie about sexual roles and about the interplay of deception and sincerity (Lesser 1991: 207-208), but also about American mores during the '50s. As Robert Miklitsch (2016) put it, “Rose functions in many ways as a screen onto which the '50s audiences could project their fears and anxieties about (female) sexuality: you were either a virgin or a ‘tramp’ [...]” On a more political note, film critic J. Hoberman (2012: 256) describes her instant success as leisure consumerism, the manifestation of a richer American Dream: “Marilyn is milk and honey, the representative of a sweet, carnal democracy, a vision of abundance for the average Joe.”

In *Niagara* there seems to be no division between the men's and women's reactions when looking at Marilyn Monroe. They are similarly entranced by her presence (Lesser 1991: 208-209). When Ray (Max Showalter) and Polly Cutler (Jean Peters), the middle class couple recently married, who witnesses the Loomises drama unfolding, sees Rose at the party, the man exults: “Why don't you ever get a dress like that?” and his wife comments: “Listen, for a dress like that you gotta start laying plans when you're about thirteen.” (Miklitsch 2016)

Indologist and historian of religions Wendy Doniger (2017: 229) calls this “the slut assumption”. She assesses the long and complicated relation between sexual roles, jewelry, and power games from the Antiquity to modern times and notices that since the eighteenth century onward, the “slut assumption” has been applied to women. The assumption is that “if a woman is seen wearing fake jewelry, she may well have bought it herself. But if she sports a new piece of valuable jewelry, she must have gotten it by sleeping [...] not with her authenticating husband, but with an illicit paramour.” (idem: 228-229). Doniger finds the origin of this prejudice in the infamous 1784 “Affair of the Necklace”, when the courtesan Jeanne de Saint-Rémy de Valois played a dirty trick on Marie Antoinette and the Cardinal Louis René Edouard de Rohan, bishop of Strasbourg, arranging a meeting in the “Bower of Venus” at Versailles of the Cardinal with a courtesan resembling the queen, in order to negotiate the purchase of a diamond necklace (Doniger 2017: 208-211). Despite the fact that the plot was exposed and Marie Antoinette was not aware of the whole cabal, the rumours and conspiracy theory fueled the people's hostility toward her, a hostility that simmered until the French Revolution.

Not only was Marilyn Monroe subjected to the “slut assumption” during the '50s, when her courtesan image was set against that of virginal Doris Day in the binary approach “woman with many lovers” versus “respectable wife” (idem: 20), but she became the longed-for jewel herself. Writing about the preparations for *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* premiere, Oates lavishly describes the whole process of fabricating the Marilyn Monroe look – all smile and glamour waves –, the army of hairstylists and makeup artists working under the supervision of Allan ‘Whitey’

Snyder, the artisan of her enduring official portrait. In his dexterous hands, Marilyn Monroe becomes an *objet d'art*:

Her face and throat were steamed, chilled, and creamed. Her body was bathed and oiled, its unsightly hairs removed; she was powdered, perfumed, painted, and set to dry. Her fingernails and toenails were painted a brilliant crimson to match her neon mouth. (Oates 2020: 417)

The 1953-1954 movie season inaugurates the disappearance of the actress in her public image “so much so that whatever she might do, she will never seem out of character.” (Hoberman 2012: 256) She becomes willy-nilly the focus of interest for the advertising industry, fashion houses, tabloids, writers, high-brow artists and not least for military propaganda (her arriving in Korea in order to sing to the American enlisted men makes history at the very landing of the helicopter). The paradox of this career which has been growing incessantly at the expense of the Marilyn Monroe charisma only is summed up by J. Hoberman:

At the year's end, the twenty-seven-year-old actress graces the cover of *Playboy's* maiden issue, while Willem de Kooning is action-painting his own abstract expressionist *Marilyn*. It is the deadly siren of *Niagara* – a force of nature, per movie's title – that will provide Andy Warhol with the basis for his multiple Marylins, whereas the proto-pop [*Gentlemen Prefer*] *Blondes* and [*How to Marry a*] *Millionaire* presented Marilyn in the cartoon role of “Marilyn Monroe”. Yet there is no particular movie that can be considered the definitive Monroe vehicle. (Hoberman 2012: 256)

Since the 1950s, the “MM look” has remained a staple for glamorous beauty, despite the sad story and frightening abuses hidden behind the golden mask which has been put on by many actresses, singers, and models, such as Madonna, Linda Evangelista, Charlize Theron, Rihanna, Beyoncé, Nicole Kidman, Jessica Alba, Scarlett Johansson, and many others. Maybe this is why Marilyn Monroe cannot make it into a believable novelistic character. She is too much a visual celebrity, so that little space remains for the literary imagination.

### 3. Conclusion: the icon does not fit into the frame

One of the many voices from *Blonde* relates an episode when, right after her debut, Marilyn Monroe enrolls incognito in a poetry class under the name of Gladys Pirig. She has an authentic passion for literature, but is afraid of being recognized:

Slipping into her seat early each week she'd lean forward over her book rereading the assignment so if you glanced in her direction you'd get the clear signal *Don't talk to me please, don't even look at me*. So it was easy not to notice her. She was serious and downlooking and prim without makeup and her skin pale and slightly shiny and her ash-blond hair rolled back and pinned up in the style women were wearing during the war if they worked in factories. It was a look of the forties and of another time. (Oates 2020: 271)

No one notices her until she reads with a mellifluous and comprehensive rhetoric “The Altar” by the metaphysical poet George Herbert. She surprises everyone with the clarity of her interpretation of the poetic form (Oates 2020: 275-277).

However, one day her colleagues recognize the shy young woman in an issue of the *Hollywood Reporter* and their perception of Gladys Pirig clashes with their admiration for Marilyn Monroe. The film star's fabricated glamour annihilates the young woman's natural mien. No one can look at "Gladys" the same way as before. Saddened by the swift exposure of her cover, the actress gives up the poetry class. Oates anticipates her disappearance by melting the image of low-profile Gladys Pirig into the blond shimmering pages from the *Hollywood Reporter*.

The artist who saw the future of culture marred by media hyper-reality and commerce and who intuited correctly Marilyn Monroe's posterity was Andy Warhol. Right after her death in August 1962, Warhol bought a promotional photograph for the movie *Niagara* and multiplied it in his well-known silkscreen painting *Marilyn Diptych*. Camille Paglia (2012: 150-151) astutely notices the concept of this two-paneled work of art that evokes the Renaissance altar piece and the excess of spray-painted gold with Byzantine suggestions (Andy Warhol's parents were Czechoslovakian immigrants of Eastern Catholic Rite). Thus, Marilyn Monroe's posthumous charisma becomes saintlike and glossy at the same time:

Marilyn's life is portrayed in all its sun and rain. On the left, we see her blazing glamour as a cartoonish symbol of the Hollywood studio system, which created her but, as it broke down, could no longer protect her. On the right is the real, humdrum, daily Marilyn, the eclipsed Norma Jeane Mortenson struggling for identity. The black-and-white images, streaked like soot stains and sodden newsprint, seemed bathed in tears, the misery of a shunned Magdalene. By the time of her death, with her erratic behaviors and sputtering career she had already become yesterday's news.

The dizzying proliferation of Marilyn's replicates the industry publicity machine pumping out her image. She was a product, as slickly packaged and heavily promoted as Campbell's soup. (Paglia 2012: 152)

Warhol's silkscreen might help us understand why *Blonde* is such a puzzling novel. Marilyn Monroe is everywhere in the book, yet nowhere especially, because Joyce Carol Oates' perspectivism reminds us almost everything we know about the actress, while the imagined details do not enhance our perception of her life too much. Even though Oates conceives Marilyn as a literary character, the line between sheer biography and entrancing fiction is too thin to circumvent the rules of the former or to take full advantage of the freedom provided by the latter. Marilyn Monroe is already a pervasive cinematic and media fiction. Words on paper cannot reconfigure her aura.

Film critic Alex. Leo Şerban (2006: 75-76) equates cinema and memory, considering that film – he calls it "moving anthropology" – employs technical progress in order to offer us slices from the life of real people in a dreamy fashion. He also thinks that cinema makes us accustomed to old age. The present preserved by old movies is the treasure trove of our past:

It is a *natural* ageing, like each of us becoming older. But every movie projection confronts us with this raw truth: our ageing, as movie goes, comes with the obsolescence of the film roll and the stories it encapsulates. Any movie is melancholy, any projection is its own elegy. (Şerban 2006: 77, my translation)

Even if she did not plan it, Marilyn Monroe extracted her always young image from the confinements of the silver screen and made it adaptable to all forms of art and for all generations. Perhaps this is the shining side of her bitter immortality.

## References

- Doniger, Wendy. 2017. *The Ring of Truth and Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoberman, James. 2012. *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War*. New York: The New Press.
- Johnson, Greg, Joyce Carol Oates. 2001. "Blonde Ambition: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates" in *Prairie Schooner* 75 (3). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, pp. 15-19.
- King, Stephen. 2011 (1974). *Carrie*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Lesser, Wendy. 1991. *His Other Half: Men Looking at Women through Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Miklitsch, Robert. 2016. *The Red and the Black: American Film Noir in the 1950s* (e-book). Urbana: University of Illinois Press. Kindle.
- Miller, Laura. 2000. "Norma Jeane" in *The New York Times*, April 2. [Online]. Available: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/02/reviews/000402.002millet.html?r=2As> [Accessed 2021, August 31].
- Monroe, Marilyn with Ben Hecht. 2007 (1974). *My Story*. Foreword by Joshua Greene. Lanham and New York: Taylor Trade Publishing.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. 2020 (2000). *Blonde*. With a new Introduction by Elaine Showalter. New York: Ecco.
- Paglia, Camille. 2012. *Glittering Images: A Journey through Art from Egypt to Star Wars*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Șerban, Alex. Leo. 2006. "Bilanț. Un an de *I-D*, un an de 'Filmemorie' " in *De ce vedem filme: Et in Arcadia cinema*. Iași: Polirom, pp. 72-84.