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When Objects Speak: Thing Narrative, Trauma, and Identity in Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage*

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Abstract

This study applies thing narrative theory to analyze Joyce Carol Oates's *Carthage* (2014), examining how material objects function as active agents in trauma narratives. Focusing on Brett Kincaid's Purple Heart medal and Cressida Mayfield's drawings, this study attempts to answer how objects materialize traumatic experience that resists linguistic expression, how they exercise agency in shaping character behaviors and emotions, and how human-object interactions construct and transform identity. The finding reveals that the Purple Heart, awarded for military service, becomes a site of contradictory meanings. It simultaneously symbolizes honor and materializes destruction which exposes the gap between patriotic rhetoric and veteran suffering. Cressida's Escher-influenced artworks materialize her experience of familial misrecognition and social invisibility, exercising their fullest agency only after her disappearance. Through this material lens, the study demonstrates that the objects in *Carthage* are no longer passive symbols but as narrative agents that render visible the wounds embedded in both military commemoration and family dynamics.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Thing Narrative, Trauma, Material Objects, Joyce Carol Oates, *Carthage*

1. Introduction

The September 11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq became major themes in contemporary American literature. Numerous writ-

ers began exploring war trauma, the psychological struggles of veterans, and the profound impact of conflict on American society. Within this literary wave, Joyce Carol Oates' *Carthage* (2014) received widespread attention for its unique narrative perspective and profound humanistic concern. The novel depicts the physical and mental imbalance suffered by Brett Kincaid, an Iraq War veteran, due to combat trauma, alongside the devastating impact of the mysterious disappearance of Cressida, a young girl from the Mayfield family, on both households.

Following its publication, *Carthage* drew considerable attention from both critics and scholars. Reviewers such as NPR's Alan Cheuse praised its "rollercoaster, demon-twisted" narrative and Oates's sharpness and compassion in depicting how war unsettles American family life [1]. Perraudin of *The Guardian* likewise noted the novel's interesting experiments with form, praising Oates's portrayal of the complex damage done to the fabric of a society by war [2]. Francesca Wade added that the book remains unsparing in its portrayal of the Iraq War's emotional burden on soldiers and civilians [3].

In terms of scholarly discussions, Olson interprets the prison confining Brett Kincaid as a Gothic structure where suppressed transgressions resurface [4]; Ruszkiewicz reads the novel intertextually as a modern counterpart to Troilus and Cressida [5]; and Rau analyzes veterans' estrangement from civilian society, showing how their fractured identities recast them as perceived threats [6]. Other studies, including those by Tang Liwei and by Xu Hui and Guo Qiqing, shift the focus to narrative form, exploring the novel's multiple viewpoints, conflicting discourses, and postmodern techniques such as collage and fragmentation [7] [8].

It is noteworthy that the material dimension within the novel has so far been insufficiently discussed. In fact, *Carthage* is replete with symbolic objects, including the Purple Heart medal and Cressida's paintings, which are the focus of this study. These objects serve not merely as plot devices but as vital conduits that carry memories, bear witness to trauma, and bridge the past with the present. Their meanings shift fluidly through the perspectives of different characters, offering a unique entry for understanding the novel's deeper significance.

2. Thing Narrative and Trauma Literature

Thing narrative refers to a narrative mode or critical approach that foregrounds material objects as active participants in storytelling rather than passive symbols or background details. In thing narratives, objects are endowed with agency: they shape events, mediate human relationships, carry memory, and generate meaning through their interactions with human subjects. Rather than merely reflecting human psychology, objects in thing narratives function as narrative agents that influence plot development, affective dynamics, and identity formation.

In traditional literary criticism, objects are often regarded as decorative backgrounds or symbolic representations of characters' psychology. However, since the late twentieth century, with the rise of material culture studies, scholars have begun to re-examine the status and function of objects in literary narratives. Thing

narrative, as an emerging critical perspective, emphasizes that material objects are not merely passive entities but subjects possessing narrative agency and actively participating in narrative construction. In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai proposes that objects accrue shifting meanings as they move through different social and historical contexts. As he writes, "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" [9]. He further remarks that "the social history of things and their cultural biography are not entirely separate matters … the social history of things constrains the form, meaning, and structure of more short-term, specific, and intimate trajectories" [9]. This understanding of objects as dynamic rather than fixed has become central to contemporary narrative theory.

A parallel intervention comes from Bruno Latour's *Actor-Network Theory*. Latour challenges the strict divide between human subjects and non-human matter, suggesting instead that any material entity capable of making a difference within a network can function as an actor. While Latour's framework broadens the scope of agency across human and non-human actors, it is important to distinguish such approaches from Bill Brown's more specific intervention within literary studies. Brown's *Thing Theory*, by contrast, does not offer a general theory of object agency but focuses on a particular moment: the breakdown of an object's habitual function, when its material presence becomes newly visible and disruptive. Bill Brown offers another influential formulation of thing theory within literary studies [10]. He argues that objects become "things" precisely at the moment when their habitual functions break down: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls…" [11]. Drawing on Heidegger, Brown observes that "the passage from object to thing happens when the subject-object relation is temporarily interrupted" [11]. He also emphasizes that even when we grasp an object's social or symbolic meanings, "there remains something that exceeds these meanings" [11]. Later, Brown extends this framework by framing "undoing" as a deliberate political act that activates thingness, as the breakdown of the book's functional role exposes both the materiality of the object itself and the systemic biases embedded in the human-made structures it embodies [12].

Thing narrative theory offers a particularly useful perspective for trauma studies. Cathy Caruth defines trauma through its belatedness and its resistance to full integration into consciousness: "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event… its very unassimilated nature… returns to haunt the survivor later on" [13]. She further notes that trauma's latency "consists not in forgetting reality but in an inherent latency within the experience itself" [13]. Because trauma often evades coherent narration, material objects can bear the weight of experiences that remain unspeakable. Similarly, Dominick LaCapra stresses the significance of memory's processes in traumatic recall. He describes traumatic memory as "a form of acting out in which the past is compulsively repeated" [14]. This acting-out mode, however, can potentially be moved toward working-through [14].

Building upon LaCapra's framework and extending it through the lens of thing-narrative theory, material objects such as photographs, documents, or monuments can be understood as tangible traces that impede or facilitate this working-through process. Such objects embody the persistence of painful histories while offering a material form through which those histories may be confronted.

Taken together, these perspectives show how thing narrative theory enables a richer understanding of trauma literature. Objects do not merely decorate the fictional world; they act within it. By materializing memory, mediating affect, and revealing the fractured temporality of traumatic experience, they serve as active agents in narratives shaped by the pressures of trauma.

Based on the above theoretical framework, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do objects materialize and carry traumatic memory?

2. How do objects exercise agency in shaping characters' behaviors and emotions?

3. How do human-object interactions construct narrative and transform identity?

3. The Purple Heart: Alienation of an Honor Symbol

The Purple Heart medal is one of the oldest military decorations in the United States, and is awarded to service members who are wounded or killed in military operations. Since its establishment by George Washington in 1782, this medal has carried American society's collective memory and value judgments about military sacrifice, symbolizing honor, courage, and patriotism. In American culture, the Purple Heart medal is not merely a marker of individual heroism but a material proof of the nation's recognition of citizens' sacrifice for their country. However, in *Carthage*, through Brett Kincaid's relationship with this military decoration, Oates subverts the symbol's traditional meaning by showing how traumatic experience becomes materialized and exerting force on people.

The novel establishes the medal's connection to the originary traumatic event through fragmented, disjointed syntax: "When the grenade exploded, and the wall collapsed. It was combat. It was in action. Which is why you have been awarded a Purple Heart" [15]. These terse phrases present the medal as the direct material consequence of trauma, while it fails to create meaningful connection between violence and honor. As Herman observes, "traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" [15]. The Purple Heart serves as precisely such an encoded form, a material object carrying sensory memories of explosion, bodily destruction, and near-death. When Brett's fiancée attempts to normalize his symptoms—" You do not limp... I think it is not real. It is just something in your head" [15], the Purple Heart stands as material evidence contradicting her denial, proving that trauma is inscribed in destroyed tissue and neurological damage.

For Brett, the Purple Heart functions primarily as a trigger that repeatedly re-

minds him of the explosion and psychic shattering. The narrative's bitter assessment reveals how the medal materializes collective trauma: "Purple Heart—that was the medal everybody knew" [15]. It embodies what the narrator calls the "(Secret) meaning": "All of the Mayfields, died to him. Or was it instead that the Mayfields lived, and the corporal had died?" [15]. The parenthetical "(Secret)" indicates that the cruel truth of self erasure by war cannot be spoken within the patriotic discourse that produced the medal. The medal thus performs a double function: publicly, it signals honor and sacrifice; privately, it exposes the existential rupture that the narrative insists cannot be absorbed by national narratives of heroism.

The Purple Heart is not merely a passive carrier of traumatic memory; it actively exercises agency in shaping the behaviors and emotions of Brett and those around him. As Latour argues, objects participate in the constitution of action [10]. The medal's agency begins even before Brett's deployment: "the shameful fact was, Brett had coveted a Purple Heart... he'd considered the Purple Heart as the most likely medal he might be awarded; and if so, the trick would be to be wounded but not to die" [15]. The anticipated medal functions as an object with a "special symbolic intensity, exemplified in the tendency to frame more mundane plunder in the transfer of special arms, insignia, or body parts belonging to the enemy" [9], shaping Brett's enlistment decision and his calculation of acceptable sacrifice.

For Brett himself, the Purple Heart exercises more destructive agency. On the night of Cressida's disappearance, Brett is described as: "Iraq War vet, wounded, Purple Heart, multiple disabilities, neuropsychological deficits" [15]. The Purple Heart appears not as honorary symbol but as diagnostic marker that signals violence and cruelty. The medal also exercises agency by foreclosing futures: Brett's pre-war fantasy of being "wounded but not to die" proves tragically misguided; the medal marks not successful sacrifice but devastating destruction. The medal's agency is perhaps most evident in its capacity to produce shame; it compels desire while simultaneously generating shame about that desire, a double bind that shapes Brett's entire relationship to military service and his wounded body.

Through dynamic interaction, the Purple Heart alters both its own meaning and the character's identity. As Appadurai argues, objects possess "biographies" whose meanings shift across contexts [9]. For Brett, the Purple Heart leads to a fragmented self. Before deployment, Brett imagined himself controlling the medal's meaning, deploying it to secure social recognition. After his return, however, the power dynamic reverses. His identity fragments into incompatible subject positions: "the corporal," "the war hero," the brain-damaged patient, the criminal suspect. The Purple Heart cannot hold these fragments together; instead, it marks their irreparable separation. Brett's reflection in solitary confinement reveals this fragmentation: "All of the Mayfields died to him. Or was it instead that the Mayfields lived, and the corporal had died?" [15]. This suggests that the iden-

tity of the corporal that organized around military service and symbolized by the Purple Heart has died, even as Brett's biological body continues living. Brett's interaction with the medal also reveals the impossibility of integrating his military and civilian identities. Although the medal was awarded for service to the nation, it prevents Brett from fulfilling the domestic masculine role that should be his reward for that service.

The Purple Heart not only transforms Brett's identity, it also demonstrates how objects participate in family narrative construction, particularly through Ethel Kincaid, Brett's mother. When Brett is arrested as a suspect in Cressida's disappearance, Ethel immediately collects a bag of objects:

> She'd brought with her a supply of the prescription drugs her son was obliged to take—(at least a dozen different medications, most of them more than once a day), medical reports and U.S. Army discharge documents. She brought her son's Purple Heart and the Iraq campaign medal, in a chamois drawstring bag. [15]

This collection is not random but purposeful. The medal compels her to perform a specific narrative: not criminal but hero. "Proudly Ethel displayed these in the living room... held these in cupped hands for the camera" [15]. Ethel builds what can be seen as a kind of testimony for Brett's innocence. Each item plays its own role: the medications show that he is still receiving treatment, the medical reports offer clinical evidence of his injuries, the discharge papers confirm his official military status, and the Purple Heart stands as proof of honorable service and real sacrifice. However, the medal's meaning cannot be stabilized through her performances. Investigating authorities are not persuaded; the community remains suspicious; Brett himself cannot inhabit the honored hero identity. The medal's meaning exceeds Ethel's control, demonstrating what Brown calls objects' "irreducibility", they always retain "something that exceeds" assigned meanings [11]. The medal is supposed to promise recognition, protection, honor, successful reintegration, all the things that Ethel's performance tries to activate. But what it actually delivers is suspicion, isolation, the marking of Brett as permanently damaged and potentially dangerous. This failure reveals that the Purple Heart carries contradictions within its very material form, it is simultaneously an object of honor and an object of stigma, a symbol of sacrifice and a marker of destruction, a promise of protection and evidence of vulnerability.

In *Carthage*, the Purple Heart is more than a symbolic decoration. It actively shapes the novel's trauma narrative by making Brett's incomprehensible war experience tangible. This novel shows how the medal exposes the violence in turning human suffering into patriotic symbols. While it promises honor, recognition, and a successful homecoming, it often delivers fragmentation, isolation, and lasting damage. Besides, it also reveals the gap between the nation's rhetoric of military sacrifice and the lived reality of veterans. In this way, the Purple Heart becomes material evidence of a society that celebrates sacrifice while neglecting those who have given so much.

4. Cressida's Drawings: Art as Witness to Absence and Presence

If the Purple Heart in Carthage materializes the trauma of military violence and failed heroism, Cressida Mayfield's drawings represent a different form of suffering: the slow erosion of self caused by familial misrecognition, social alienation, and the impossibility of being truly seen. Cressida's pen-and-ink artworks, heavily influenced by M.C. Escher's geometrical illusions and metamorphoses, undergo a profound transformation in meaning following her disappearance, shifting from objects of parental concern and incomprehension to precious relics of a lost daughter. Through examining Cressida's art, the following discussion explores how objects materialize the trauma of invisibility, how they exercise agency in demanding recognition in the creator's absence, and how interactions between the Mayfield parents and these artworks reconstruct both the objects' meanings and the family's understanding of identity and loss.

Unlike Brett's Purple Heart, which carries the spectacular violence of combat, Cressida's art embodies what Nixon calls "slow violence", "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight" that is difficult to represent or recognize [16]. This concept is particularly apt for Cressida's experience, which is shaped not by a single traumatic event but by the cumulative effects of exclusion, misrecognition, and prolonged invalidation. From a thing-narrative perspective, the drawings function as material mediators of this slow violence. Rather than offering linear testimony or narrating trauma directly, they give form to damage that is otherwise difficult to articulate. Produced through repetitive, embodied labor, the drawings bear the marks of Cressida's alienation and deferred recognition. Before Cressida's disappearance, her parents' responses to the drawings oscillate between pride, concern, and fundamental incomprehension. As Lettie comments: "Cressida's drawings are like riddles. I've always thought it was too bad, her art is so 'difficult'" [15]. Her works are described as "highly detailed, obviously very skillful works of art like nothing he'd ever seen executed by anyone in Carthage" [15]. The drawings materialize Cressida's subjective experience of alienation through their formal qualities.

The specific subject matter further materializes her sense of alienation. Her drawing Metamorphoses depicts "human figures morphed into mannequins, then geometrical figures; then numerals, then abstract molecular designs; then back to human figures again. As the figures passed through the metamorphoses from left to right their 'whiteness' shaded into 'darkness'... then... became 'white' again" [15]. This materializes a profound insight: the instability of human identity, the process by which persons become objects and objects become persons—precisely Cressida's experience within her family, where she feels perpetually objectified, categorized, misunderstood. The artistic process offers Cressida entry into an alternative reality where she can exist differently, yet she immediately qualifies: "Oh but, it's lonely there" [15]. The drawings thus materialize both refuge and isolation. Another significant work, Descending and Ascending, based on Escher's im-

possible staircases, materializes the futility and repetition characterizing Cressida's experience. After her disappearance, Zeno examines this drawing "as if it might provide a clue to his daughter's disappearance" [15]. The drawing's endless loops materialize Cressida's sense of being trapped in familial, social, educational misunderstandings. Only in her absence do her parents begin to read what the drawings had been saying all along.

Zeno's interaction with Metamorphoses reveals this dynamic: "I didn't know what the hell to make of it, initially" [15]. His initial bafflement gives way to recognition: "It was the first time I realized, I think, that our daughter was so special. You can't imagine Juliet doing anything like this" [15]. The drawing reconstructs Zeno's understanding of his daughter, forcing him to see her as uniquely gifted, yet this recognition creates sibling hierarchy and family tension. Arlette's interaction is more conflicted: "I'd always thought I might work with her" [15]. The conditional past tense indicates a fantasy that never materialized. The drawings exercise agency by refusing this fantasy, creating psychological distance.

While Cressida explained to Brett that her drawings were "a way of exploring the 'interior' of her own brain" [15], this explanation attempts to guide Brett's viewing, yet the text suggests his comprehension is limited. The drawings exercise pedagogical agency, but that agency is only partially successful, they cannot fully bridge the gap between Cressida's consciousness and others' understanding.

The traumatic dimension of Cressida's artistic practice is most explicitly materialized in her relationship with her geometry teacher, Mr. Rickard. After Cressida showed him her portfolio, he "wounded her by saying, 'Not bad. Pretty good, in fact. But you must be original. Escher did this first, so why copy him?' Cressida was devastated" [15]. This incident represents the trauma of artistic invalidation. As Caruth notes, trauma is characterized by its capacity to "return to haunt the survivor" [13]. For Cressida, the Rickard incident returns repeatedly, shaping her subsequent artistic choices and her willingness to share her work.

After Cressida's disappearance, every interaction with her drawings is transformed by absence. Objects that were sources of concern become sources of consolation and pain. This demonstrates how, as Hirsch argues, objects become crucial to "postmemory", the way survivors "remember" through "imaginative investment" in material traces [17]. Zeno's post-disappearance interaction is marked by desperate hermeneutics: he examines Descending and Ascending as if it might provide a clue. The drawing has become what Herman calls "testimony" when verbal testimony is unavailable [18]. Yet the drawing resists yielding clear testimony, becoming an exercise in frustrated meaning-making.

The most striking demonstration of posthumous agency appears in Arlette's appropriation of Cressida's early work for a Woman Space poster about domestic violence. The narrative notes: "Arlette had appropriated one of Cressida's early, pre-Escher pen-and-ink drawings, in which childlike figures played together with animals in a floating oasis of green, as the background artwork for a Woman Space poster" [15]. The drawing is made to serve a purpose entirely alien to Cressida's

intentions; it now "calls for volunteers" in ways it never did during Cressida's life. Significantly, "Zeno who'd often been offended by Arlette's appropriation of their daughter's art was touched by this" [15]. The drawing exercises emotional agency even as its use troubles him. The library exhibition represents a collective transformation of the drawings' meaning. Objects that existed within private space are now public, displayed for community viewing. Through this exhibition, the drawings participate in constructing collective memory and community identity.

Through examination of Cressida's drawings, the objects emerge as materializations of the slow violence produced by familial misrecognition and social invisibility. They assert their own agency by demanding attention and interpretation and they engage in dynamic interactions that reshape meanings and identities. Most significantly, Cressida's drawings embody a fundamental paradox: they are simultaneously material proof of her existence and markers of her absence. They testify that Cressida was here, that she had extraordinary talent and vision. Yet they also testify that she was not seen, not recognized, not valued during her life. The drawings exercise their fullest agency only after Cressida is gone. They became more visible, more valued, more carefully attended to in her absence than they ever were in her presence. This tragic irony structures the objects' meaning: like Brett's Purple Heart, which promises recognition but delivers destruction, Cressida's drawings promise communication but document isolation, promise visibility but materialize invisibility.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that human-object interactions in the narrative do not merely reflect pre-existing identities but actively participate in their construction and transformation. Through sustained engagement with material objects, characters come to inhabit new positions within personal, familial, and social narratives. Brett's Purple Heart promised honor but delivered destruction; Cressida's drawings demanded attention yet documented neglect. Both objects exercised their fullest agency only after the subjects they represented were destroyed or removed. They function not merely as plot devices or symbolic motifs, but as active narrative participants: they materialize traumatic experience, exert agency to shape character behavior, and construct and deconstruct identity through dynamic interaction with human subjects. This research also demonstrates how object narrative provides a powerful critical perspective for understanding contemporary American trauma literature. Trauma theorists have long emphasized the "unspeakability" of traumatic experience; it resists direct linguistic expression, fragments coherent narrative, and operates through latency and repetition rather than linear progression. By materializing trauma in objects, Oates finds a way to represent the unrepresentable. The Purple Heart and Cressida's drawings provide tangible form for what cannot be directly articulated. They become the material "testimony" of trauma, a testimony, as Herman argues, that functions when linguistic testimony fails.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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