

The Black Hole of Loss in Zibby Oneal's *A Formal Feeling* (1982)

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A Formal Feeling is a psychologically astute novel focused on a significant trauma and the dysfunction that ensues from it in the life of a white, middle-class female in her mid-teens. The substance of this novel is strong, but what earned it this year's Phoenix Award for a book that has stood the test of twenty years is not its subject matter alone but also its formal excellence, which transcends many of the boundaries seemingly imposed on writers for young adults.¹

Zibby Oneal is an imagistic writer. In one of the few in-depth studies of her works, *Presenting Zibby Oneal* (1991), Susan Bloom and Cathryn Mercier demonstrate the strength of her imagery, examining her three novels for young adults: *The Language of Goldfish* (1980), *A Formal Feeling* (1982), and *In Summer Light* (1985). Each of Oneal's three slim volumes proves economically packed with metaphoric leitmotifs appropriate to the special vision of each young protagonist and the individualized crisis and pain she undergoes at that moment of her development. In the case of our Phoenix Award book, *A Formal Feeling*, Oneal relies on her usual imagistic sources—colors, shapes, natural scenery, domestic objects and settings, photographs and paintings, compelling retrieved memories, some in the form of flashbacks, and literary allusions—using these images to draw the reader into the subtleties of pain being experienced by sixteen-year-old Anne Cameron over her Christmas break from secondary boarding school.

Anne's brief holiday journey back to her university town and her familiar childhood home, the latter now inhabited only occasionally by her college-age brother, Spencer, is made strange by her widowed professor father's recent marriage to Dory. Anne had known her new stepmother previously as secretary to the history department in which Anne's father teaches. Initially, the simple plot of return home presents us with two likely possibilities for Anne's apparent sense of disturbance and lack of enthusiasm for the trip. The first possibility is that she resents both her father and Dory, her father for picking this unlikely surrogate barely a year after his wife's death, and Dory for attempting to take over her marvelous mother's role in ways Anne sees as faltering and inadequate. A second possibility with more Freudian undertones is that Anne is jealous of Dory's place in her father's heart. Anne herself considers the first explanation of her feelings of alienation as likely—Dory is such a slob compared to the first Mrs. Cameron. Indeed, Anne almost manages to convince us and herself that Dory's inadequacy as a surrogate is the real problem. Conversely, nothing in her consciousness as presented to us suggests the second explanation: Oedipal or Electral jealousy (except perhaps to suspicious minds like mine).²

Rather, Oneal gradually brings to the fore a third possibility for Anne's malaise—a reason whose establishment constitutes the suspense inherent in the book's structure of brief flashbacks to earlier times. These flashbacks are unfamiliar and confusing to Anne as they pop up. She is puzzled, for instance, by a vision of a train ride and a little girl hugging a stuffed blue rabbit, a vision so strong and detailed that Anne feels compelled to write it down (108-09). Briefly stated, this third possibility presented by Oneal is that Anne is suffering from repressed feelings of ambivalence and consequent guilt toward her dead mother—whom she consciously remembers as perfect. Her dammed up feelings leave her estranged, apparently indifferent and empty, and – as all of the natural imagery of winter that surrounds her suggests – frozen.

Essentially, we are led to see the ways in which Anne is left with the “formal feeling” depicted in Dickinson's poem, “After Great Pain.” Significantly, Oneal quotes this poem thrice, once in the title, once as frontispiece, and then later in the book. In this last instance, it becomes imbedded in the plot, for we discover that the poem was a portion of an English midterm over which star English student, Anne, found herself blocked—the midterm on which she barely earned a D (121-22). Now she decides she must make an A on her final paper to be written over the holidays. But once again Anne finds herself blocked—this time in trying to write on *The Heart of Darkness*. Instead of beginning the critical paper she wants to excel on, Anne is struck by her vision of the little girl on the train clutching her blue rabbit. Anne will take most of Christmas vacation to discover that the little girl is herself, traveling along with her brother to visit their grandparents on a previous Christmas.

This journey is the vital key to the repressed memory of Anne's mother's leaving her children for a period of time and separating from her husband to “find herself.” This Christmas journey undertaken when Anne was eight, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is intricately tied in with all the multiple images of journeying into the psychological interior. Such journeying, Dickinson's poem intimates, is stymied by the paralysis, “the Hour of Lead,” that follows Great Pain.

Yet, Anne finds her way into the psychological interior eventually and that is one of the substantive strengths of the book. For as Bloom and Mercier point out in their study of Oneal, her protagonists are not only strong in themselves but usually surrounded by sympathetic family and friends who help them to find their way to a relatively happy ending. In Anne's case, nothing that anyone can say gets through to her really, despite her brother's and father's gentle reminders of her mother's controlling ways. Nor does Anne remember how she herself rebelled on occasion against this far-from-perfect mother. More compelling, however, are scenes she observes between her old friend Laura and Laura's mother, scenes of quarreling and emotional interdependence, that help to break through the ice surrounding Anne, although she doesn't understand this when it is happening.

The astute reader, however, is not dependent on Anne alone for this understanding. Oneal's use of imagistic evocation is tied in with another characteristic of her writing. Oneal once tried unsuccessfully to write in the first person point-of-view

popular with many writers for young adults (Bloom 28). But this narrative stance, popular since *Catcher in the Rye*, was not comfortable for her. Instead, Oneal usually adopts what Henry James calls a “central consciousness” in which an omniscient yet unintrusive narrator permits the reader to see what the protagonist sees and experience what the protagonist experiences. However, the central consciousness operates without adopting the first person voice or accepting the limitations of the protagonist as to diction or interpretation. This narrative stance is the point-of-view I’ve discussed elsewhere in relation to several other fine novels for children and young adults: *The Yearling*, *Souder*, *Julie of the Wolves*, and *The Sound of Chariots*. The last of these works, Molly Hunter’s semi-autobiographical novel, like *A Formal Feeling*, deals with grief and loss. As does Oneal, Hunter manipulates a complex central consciousness buttressed by imagistic leitmotifs, recurring and changing throughout the work as Hunter’s protagonist, Bidy, comes closer to understanding both her own trauma and the problems of others around her.

Within the confines of Anne’s consciousness, one can see her pain and her attempts to deal with it in various ways. On her initial return with her brother Spencer to the house now inhabited by her stepmother, Anne notes two dirty cups in the kitchen sink, as well as other disorder at odds with the house as managed by her mother. After Spencer seems to dismiss her disapproval, she quickly puts on old running clothes and begins a mind-numbing run: “She had found that she could think of nothing at all while she ran and that afterward, sometimes for several hours, she remained forgetful, enclosed, as it seemed, in shell of crystal” (15). Later, at dinner, she distances herself from her father, Dory, and Spencer by seeing them as “actors putting on a homecoming scene” and herself as “audience, sitting high up on the second balcony, reluctantly watching the fiction unfold” (24). In these passages and thereafter, Oneal exploits various advantages of the central consciousness not available in the first person narration in many young adult novels. For example, the “shell of crystal,” introduced as it is by the narrator’s “as it seemed,” is only ambiguously Anne’s own metaphor for her post-running state. It ties in with the icy images that become cumulative in the narrative. In the scene from dinner, Anne’s perception of “acting” on the part of her family is countered for the reader by the independent narration of the acts and words of other three who, indeed, do not appear to be “acting” but genuinely at ease and welcoming, if naturally tentative in their attempts to include her in their new life together.

The deftly depicted central consciousness and the cumulative imagery both external to and internal to Anne’s consciousness bring us to Anne’s climactic breakthrough, which comes as the result of a physical trauma experienced while she is skating alone early in the morning on an artificial pond close to her home. In attempting to do figure eights, the repetitive type of exercise that her mother, both a fine skater and fine pianist, continually imposed on her, Anne falls and badly sprains her ankle. Not only is she forced almost to crawl the several blocks home, but she also has to remain immobilized for most of the rest of the vacation, missing even the Christmas concert in which she was planning to participate with her friend Laura.

Everything surrounding this accident seems not just determined by the leitmotif of ice and its significance in depicting Anne's frozen psychic state, but psychologically *overdetermined*. Anne goes out alone, early in the morning as her mother often did, and attempts to perfect a skating figure that her mother did effortlessly and seems to have forced on Anne in the past. The physical wound she receives opens up the possibility for Anne finally to recognize the psychological wounds she suffered in the previous loss of her mother and the way in which she felt herself responsible for her mother's leaving to "find herself": Anne, at eight, having rebelliously refused to do those repetitive exercises on the piano, also imposed by the mother. When the doctor who binds up Anne's ankle says, "Look. . . take it easy. There are some things you have no control over" (151), Anne is ready to accept this permission to let go of the psychic control she is exerting over her memories of conflict. She refuses medication, preferring to feel the pain, not just of her ankle, but the greater pain of her loss of her mother, not just once but twice—first at that past Christmas and then through death. And Oneal doesn't tie up the psychological complications of Anne's state without having her try to deal with the question of whether she could have really loved the imperfect mother she now remembers her to be. Ironically, Dory, the imperfect stepmother, in her affectionate care of Anne after her accident, reminds the teenager of her mother's nurturing ministrations, infusing Anne's recollections with revitalized love for the first Mrs. Cameron.

The work of an imagistic writer, like that of a poet, is difficult to describe and seems to demand a closer reading than is possible here. One characteristic of imagistic writing, in both poetry and prose, is called by Russian formalists like Victor Shklovskij, *faktura*—usually translated as "density" (Erlich 150). Objects, scenes, and actions that seem simple on the surface become layered with meaning as we experience them over and over again in the progress of the writing. And clearly, this happens in both the writing and the reading of *A Formal Feeling*. Oneal's prize winning novel is not a long book, but it is dense with meaning just as Anne's psychological state is dense. I think this is why I was inspired to add another metaphor to the many that Oneal has worked through. When in my title I refer to the black hole of loss in *A Formal Feeling*, I am invoking an astronomical term, the black hole designating a star become so impacted and dense with energy that it no longer gives out light, its presence to be intuited only by what appears to be total absence. Anne's grief and guilt manifests itself as total absence of feeling, but her emotions are really dense and impacted with psychic energy. Oneal's style of writing partakes of this same density and psychic energy. After twenty years, this energy is still waiting there to be experienced by old and new readers.

Notes

¹ In giving the Phoenix Award, we do not mean to suggest that no one at time of publication noted the excellence of this work, only that it won no award we have designated as major. In this case, *A Formal Feeling* was reviewed favorably and won a number of special mentions: *New York Times* Best Book of the Year, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, *American Bookseller* "Pick of the List." Many mentioned its stylistic excellence.

² I have a suspicious mind. I think Oneal has somewhat oversimplified Anne's feelings, although I suspect that the material regarding her mother is the only material she needs to deal with at sixteen. If this were an adult novel rather than a young adult, I think we would find Anne consulting her therapist just about now (around the age of thirty-six) to understand further her mother's need "to find herself" and to deal with the ways in which her father was imperfect in his handling of the situation of the mother's death and his subsequent rapid remarriage: bringing Dory into the family with little preparation—marrying her first and then informing Anne. (The only hint Oneal gives of Anne's disturbance in this area is Anne's persistent misinterpretation of Browning's "My Last Duchess.") Incidentally, to bring in my own feminist prejudices—Prof. Cameron, after his apparently rather controlling first wife, found it pretty convenient to rush into a second marriage with a woman who thinks he's so far above her that she can't understand the papers she painstakingly types for him!

Works Cited

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