# WHO IS THE *BLONDE* ?

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## 1. Introduction

The need for this approach to *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates is motivated by the time that has elapsed since the first edition. There simply isn't enough consistent material written about this particular novel. In fact, the novel has barely passed through the literary circles of the Western hemisphere. Its spread among the common yet dedicated, readers is even slower although this work is so well-written that it can be easily read by anyone.

The following paragraphs are just a few of the ideas comprised by the book. It is safe to assume that they were chosen for their importance in the economy of the novel. It is just as true that these issues are not the only things to be discussed within the corpus of this work. In fact they stand for the immediate and the obvious. Moreover, their discussion does not stop here but will be deepened in the following chapters, as the work will progress as its intrinsic order requires.

The size of this particular novel is not a deterrent. The fact of the matter is that one can read it relatively easily. Indeed, it takes less than a week, with breaks and all. But this is of low importance compared to the way its reading works. The reader is never overwhelmed by information or by twisted phrases. The reader is in fact keen to keep on reading. The novel seems never to end.

*Blonde* is a novel of mythical proportions, presenting a story which in a way refers to not one but several myths. First of



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all, it refers to the perfect image of the Hollywood star and the things that such a status brings: luxury, fame, glamour etc. It is also an inevitable reference to the successful American who started low and made her way to the top. Of course one must not forget the idea of sex-symbol of the 1960s. All these and more combine into the story of one character. But this character is by no means happy.

A drama unfolds right in front of our eyes: it starts, it peaks into a climax, but it doesn't seem to end. The reader doesn't notice that though, because although the actor has finished her part and left the scene, her story lives on. The actor leaves but the character remains, because the character is the one truly important. For the rest, one has to take into account the readers' desire to know: the book creates a myth and fascinates the readers to such an extent that only the most attentive and experienced ones can notice the boundaries between these notions.

*Blonde* is a common name starting with a capital letter. It is not articulated nor can it be found in the novel but in very few instances. This noun is the best possible choice: it doesn't speak about either Norma Jeane Baker or Marilyn Monroe. It just circumscribes the existence of a nameless being that is defined by a single attribute, although some might say that it isn't an attribute but part of the essence of this being. This character is remarkably presented by one single word: *Blonde*.

## 2. Extratextual elements

The matter of the author's identity is always a touchy subject since some believe, not unjustly, that it is the actual text which counts in a critical attempt. The claim goes that everything the reader needs to know about the world of a particular work is comprised in its form of manifestation: the



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text. And right they are. But this model works perfectly only if the reader is competent, if he has the know – how. The fact of the matter is that in most cases the reader is only partially able to grasp things. Extra hours of reading must be put in and references about the author must be read to fill in this gap. The following paragraphs provide such an example. The information about the author and her works comes from the best possible source, so that there haven't been too many alterations of the original text.

The date and place of birth of Joyce Carol Oates, the author of this novel, are rather redundant pieces of information but, just for the record, one will say that she was born in Lockport, New York, on the 16th of June 1938, in the advent year of World War II. Although life didn't seem to spoil her, her origins being rather humble and rural, she was a natural talent when it came to producing texts. A small turning-point in her life was that when she received a typewriter and began to write stories. She was turning 14 and it was time for her to attend highschool. It was there that she became a remarkable student and she was granted a scholarship which enabled her to study English at Syracuse University. Needles to say that she was an excellent university undergraduate and that she was actively involved in the cultural life associated with this particular university. It was at the University of Wisconsin that her work and study earned her Master's degree as well as the admiration of Raymond Smith, her future husband. The social unrest of the nineteen-sixties would be the next major thing in her life as it would be reflected in *With Shuddering Fall*, the first novel she published. In her thirties, Joyce Carol Oates moved to Canada, where she became an accomplished and acknowledged writer. Her writing career was so diverse that she even took up pseudonyms like Lauren Kelly and Rosamond Smith. The reader interested in her current whereabouts will be pleased to find out that she continues to



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write as well as to teach. The most important idea inherent to this paragraph is that Joyce Carol Oates had the potential, the time and the proper circumstances to build up a literary style which enabled her to write deeper and increasingly elaborate novels. She put her experience to good use when she wrote her latest novels.

The other kind of extratextual information concerns the text. There is always a need to have information about the genesis of the novel. Given enough time, such information would have surfaced. Critical monographs would have been written about this subject. But for now one has to rely on first-hand information, as it is the most accurate, even if it is not perfectly structured.

*Blonde* is a 939 page novel. This is not a mere fact and figure. It comes to the fact that it is extremely difficult to fit the story of a character in a tiny space. One can argue that the story, the epic structure, can be fitted in but that different points of view make the construction bulky. The fact remains that what started life as project for a novella turned into a fully-grown novel of considerable size.

The original idea called for a dreamy depiction of the life of Marilyn Monroe. The novella seemed the obvious choice since it is just the right size and it allows for such content. However, any dedicated reader can see that there is a problem with the theme from the very start. The main character is to suffer a continuous change in order to become more and more Marilyn Monroe. This aspect rules out the possibility of a fairy tale-like experience. Then a singular view, a voice that knows and tells from a detached position, is out of the question. With those two important shifts came the need for a new manner of expression, which could only find fulfillment in a novel.



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### 3. Intratextual elements

The size does not cast light on another matter: the literary intent of this book. The reader most certainly knows that *Blonde* is all about Marilyn Monroe. But Marilyn Monroe was by no means invented. Nor were most of the other names in this book. For instance, all the names of the husbands of the real Marilyn Monroe are similar to the names of the husbands of the Marilyn Monroe of the book. Many of the facts in the book are mirrored by reality. Yet, all these aspects do build up a biography of Marilyn Monroe. The intent of this book is fictional while its purpose is an aesthetic one. To put it simply, the reader is not supposed to search for facts but to enjoy a remarkable construct with a life of its own. The reader might not take into account these arguments in favor of the literary intent of *Blonde*. However one cannot dismiss the fact that the subtitle of *Blonde* although not present on all editions, is *a novel*. Moreover there is a paragraph above the Contents of the book which starts with *Blonde is the radically distilled 'life' in the form of fiction*.

It is this peculiar paragraph, neither the prologue nor the dedication, nor anything classifiable, that is responsible for introducing the reader into the world of the novel. This self-referential part speaks about this novel as a synecdoche. A simple definition for synecdoche would be a figure of speech in which a part of something is used for the whole. This is, in fact, vital for a work of epic proportions. It is all about the economy of the novel or, to cut it short, about which aspects are important and representative, so that they may be insisted upon and which aspects are of little importance and may be left aside. To give a better explanation of this process one needs to be reminded of the unhappy childhood the real (not the fictional) Norma Jeane had. Her poor mother Gladys had no means to care for her so she sent Norma Jeane to a foster home, then to another and so



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on. It was only eight years later that Gladys's financial situation enabled her to take her daughter back. The fictional child Norma Jeane doesn't switch so many foster homes. As a matter of fact only one was chosen to describe her sorrowful condition. Another example of how synecdoche is used to build the novel is Marilyn's equally unstable love-life. A troubled personality, the real Marilyn Monroe tried to find her fulfillment alongside several high-status men. But it was by no means smooth sailing. In fact, it only nurtured her anguish and it generated more crises which led to abortions and suicide attempts. On the other hand, the fictional Marilyn portrayed in *Blonde* has only a few symbolic love affairs with characters such as Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller, which embody different values. The use of synecdoche benefits the reader greatly for it not only reduces the size of the narrative but it also concentrates it and enables one to focus on the actress and the way she comes into being.

This novel is doing something quite unique. Alongside traditional perspectives on the main character, it brings about the posthumous perspective. To define it, one must imagine that the main character is in a pensive state and she recalls her own history. The only impediment is that the character is no longer. It is in the last part of the book, called *The Afterlife 1959-1962* that the posthumous perspective is most obvious. In the previous parts of the book the character, although in doubt of her own purpose, is living her life as much as she can. It is no wonder that everything is described in vivid colours. The last part pictures a character which, although in the spotlight, is increasingly lonely and inward-oriented. Everything becomes gloomy and dream-like. The explanation of this shift in narrative perspective lies with the life of Norma Jeane. She becomes Marilyn Monroe. But this is not a simple stage name, as it were, another name for the same thing. There are two arguments:



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Norma Jeane has no identity of her own as she has no parents to provide her with one; Norma Jeane is given the role of Marilyn Monroe which she must play throughout her life. But Marilyn Monroe is not a simple character. She is always mysterious. One cannot fully describe Marilyn Monroe. Yet she desires to be real. Marilyn Monroe is aware of her own inconsistencies. Attempts are made to surpass them. These attempts include drama lessons in which one is taught to live the life of the character not just to pretend to be the character. They are also directed towards specialized reading from Chekhov. Not surprisingly, these attempts do not yield any positive results. But while Marilyn Monroe desires to become happy by being a better actor and does not succeed in her pursuit, Marilyn Monroe becomes increasingly familiar as a character. But the familiarity with Marilyn Monroe does not imply any real certainty. She has to morph according to the situation. The real drama of Marilyn Monroe is about to come to light. She becomes aware of her situation and finds herself unable to cope with the situation except by repressing it for certain periods of time, which become increasingly shorter.

### 4. Intertextual elements

The inner life of Norma Jeane Baker / Marilyn Monroe presents itself as a complex and entangled network of thoughts. The reason behind this is the attempt to circumscribe an elusive secret inner truth. Indeed one may read the novel and understand little, if anything at all, from such parts which contain pages of Marilyn Monroe's diary. One needs some reference to texts which one can relate more easily and which will enable a much needed comparison. A beautiful example of Marilyn Monroe's diary is set in the chapter *Collected Works of Marilyn Monroe*. The final fragment of this chapter is supposed to mirror the



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troubled mind of Marilyn Monroe; hence it doesn't make much sense at first sight. Words are duplicated. The ideas of God, hell, creation and nature seem to lose their meanings. Everything is focused on the person and on her fears. But this final fragment is obviously enrooted in the final chapter of The Origin of Species. There is a peculiar kind of intertextuality. The ending of The Origin of Species is a clearly-formulated text with one central idea, evolution, but, what is more important, it ends with a hopeful and optimistic image of life. In other words, each text is focused on existence but from totally different angles and with totally different results. Yet this use of material borrowed from *The Origin of Species*, a biology-oriented book, in *Blonde*, an artistic production, is not accidental. This intertextuality had to happen because there is a permanent quest to understand oneself via one's origins. As a matter of fact, Marilyn Monroe is nothing but an archetypal character for, as the novel plays out, she becomes more and more essentialized.

## 5. Conclusion

What one may be able to say in front of an open and shut case is that the character had no escape. That is to say that the character enters the stage and exits, but cannot leave the stage, it cannot interact directly with the audience. In the beginning of her novel Oates inserted this quotation:

„In the circle of light on the stage in the midst of darkness, you have the sensation of being entirely alone…. This is called solitude in public…. During a performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle, like a snail in a shell…. You can carry it wherever you go."

*An Actor Prepares,* by Constantin Stanislavski
(translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood)



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It may not seem like much, but Joyce was smart enough to catch the ideas of the time of Marilyn Monroe. She correctly assumed that there would have been much contamination with existentialism, as this philosophy seemed to express the fifties and early sixties.

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## Cine este *Blonda*?

### *Rezumat*

Blonde este un roman care are o semnificaţie la orice nivel de lectură. Romanul creşte odată cu povestea.

Informaţiile extratextuale cuprind viaţa şi opera autorului Joyce Carol Oates, precum şi geneza romanului *Blonda*.

Informaţiile intratextuale se referă la intenţia literară, propun lectura romanului ca o sinecdocă şi discută perspectiva narativă postumă.

Se discută elementele de intertextualitate dintre finalul jurnalului lui Marylin Monroe şi finalul *Originii speciilor* de Charles Darwin.

Citatul din *Un actor se pregăteşte* de Constantin Stanislavski surprinde destinul existenţialist al actorului.



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