A Comparative Study of Universality:
Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis and Oates’ “Metamorphosis”
Mahdi Shafieyan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor at Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran
Email: aliteraturist@yahoo.com

Abstract
Comparative studies within a literature, in the world literature, or even between two different branches of art have always been attractive since in contrast to contemporary critical theories reveal the universal nature of arts. The pursuit of a theme is one of the common features among literary and artistic works, which sometimes presents itself in characters, yet the investigation of the roots of the similarities seems more significant. In this article, it is attempted to compare and collate the main characters in Shakespeare’s poetic work Venus and Adonis and Joyce Carol Oates’ short story “Metamorphosis”. Although having similarities, they give birth to the chiaroscuro of some differences. The findings confirm that the two works fly in the face of the critical theory of ideology that tries to neglect the author’s free will in writing, as the case studies are a classic poem from the seventeenth century by a British writer and a short fictional piece from the postmodern era by an American writer. Not only do they differ in place, time, genre, but also the writers’ gender. This is of paramount significance because in literary criticism and philosophy of literature the universality of literature is rejected by reader-response, deconstructionist, or New Historical studies and the like in order to omit the authenticity of literature and then include personal views, shaky history, as well as subjective perceptions. Representing the disadvantages of such theories, this study aims to lead scholars toward novel universal hermeneutics.

Keywords: Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis, Joyce Carol Oates’ “Metamorphosis”, universality

Introduction
Comparative studies have always been interesting, for they show the similarities in the ways the human believes around the globe. They are not to deny differences in history or history itself because it is a clear fact that there are so many miscellaneous viewpoints among men. Although of various thoughts, behaviors, and actions, humans by nature tend to the good and refute the bad; this is what the Abrahamic Scriptures also confirm since all were and are created in the natural disposition God instills in mankind (The Quran 30:30).

However, this has been a long-run controversial topic among historians and philosophers. Giambattista Vico, the famous historian whose idea of history’s homogeneity caused modernist literature’s cyclical narration, held that history repeats itself (Parsons 125). On the other hand stands Hegel with his “progressively linear” history (Greenstein 23), although his “dialectics” conveys a similarity through history (Heffner 4). The researcher is of the opinion that no one can deny the details of every era, yet people may tread on the same path, generally speaking. In the subsequent paragraphs, hence, to exhibit to what degree Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis (1593) and Joyce Carol Oates’ short story “Metamorphosis” (1972)—in spite of a four-century distance, as well as different nationalities, gender, and contexts—are close to each other, he tries to put forth the similarities, although some distinctions between the two are also mentioned to highlight the possible particular differences of the eras.

Literature Review
The two works usually have been compared with their well-known predecessors, as Venus and Adonis with Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Oates’ story with Kafka’s Metamorphosis. For instance, Kahn’s work concerns Adonis’s self-love or narcissism. This respect of the poem has led to some readings predicated on Lacanian conceptions of desire; for example, Catherine Belsey referring to Lacan’s “objet à” supposes that Adonis like a trompe-l’œil promises a presence but frequently tantalizes Venus and fails to deliver anything. Even the poem prompts a desire in the reader, especially female ones, but does not gratify (261-63). This is reflecting Ovid’s tale in which Eco made a prayer to the gods that Narcissus suffer from an unrequited passion as he was doing so to others (61-66).1

Jonathan Bate has noted that Shakespeare responded to Ovid’s story. The latter is a narrative of sexual passion, while in the former when Adonis tells Venus about his plan to hunt the boar, the goddess by relating the tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes makes an endeavor to delay her lover from being killed, according to her godly prophesy; it becomes, therefore,

1. See also,
a tale of delay. Bate carries on the topic that the tale draws attention to the way love stories are shaped by their tellers' motivations: since Atalanta and Hippomenes were turned into lions for their ingratitude to Venus, the story stands as a warning to love for Orpheus. Nonetheless, for Venus, it is a warning to Adonis that he should obey her. All said apart, along with Bate, there are others who assume that the source for Shakespeare’s resistant Adonis is Ovid’s myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus (Bullough 161-76; Bush 137-48; Bate 48-65).

On the other side, the main comparative work on Oates’ “Metamorphosis” is Loeb’s Literary Marriages, which puts the text beside Kafka’s masterpiece. Loeb considers Kafka as the major influence on Oates and has a deliberate study of the two stories, in which all key features of fiction like plot, themes, and characterization are under her magnifier.

**Argument**

As said above, metamorphoses have been considered as common denominators in various studies between the classic works or the modern fictional pieces, yet they are not unique to the human appearance. Words also can experience transformation that is called metaphor. In both stories, the metamorphosis is metaphorical, which is used by Venus in the Shakespearean and by the narrator in the Oatesian opus to compare Adonis and Matthew with animals. In the former work, Venus, unable to convince Adonis to acquiesce to her desire, asks him to tame his inner steed of pride.

Vouchsafe, thou wonder, to alight thy steed,
And rein his proud head to the saddle-bow.
If thou wilt deign this favour, for thy meed
A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know.
Here come and sit, where never serpent hisses,
And being set, I’ll smother thee with kisses. (13-18)

Then he becomes a deer:

I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer:
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain, or in dale;
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.
Within this limit is relief enough,
Sweet bottom grass, and high delightful plain. (231-36)

Benefiting from metaphors to describe herself, in another scene, Venus advises Adonis to chase a hare, among many others. This happens when Adonis is on top of her, so she makes the story long in order to enjoy better (673-714). As hare was regarded the “king … of all venery” (Burrow 211) and venery, deriving from Venus, means both game and sexual relationship, here Venus incites Adonis to hunt her.

However, in “Metamorphosis” we have just one example in which Matthew is likened to a worm: “Ronnie said: ‘I’m going to set that bed [Matthew’s] on fire. Get that big worm up and moving fast!’” (462, sic). These references to animals indicate that taking some actions may lead one to a subhuman form, so they are no longer suitable for the human community. Adonis who refuses to have sexual relationship, a sensation associated with animality, is transferred into the floral life. In essence, what Wilhelm Emrich says about Kafka’s animal figures could be applicable to our samples: “They represent the subliminal dreamlike world, the state of man before [sic] he thinks, that part of him that is prehuman and early human, a part that is always present along with everything else within his soul” (141, emphasis added). Mention should also be made that the characters’ change, although to a subhuman creature, metaphorically implies excellence; this will be talked below.

The second change or metamorphosis occurs in love, represented frequently in altering colors of red and white. In this regard, Shakespeare’s continual mingling of crimson and pale is noteworthy:

Still is he sullen, still he lours and frets,
‘Twixt crimson shame, and anger ashy pale,
Being red she loves him best, and being white,
Her best is bettered with a more delight. (75-78)

In another section, there is a battle in Venus between the red and white of passion:

To note the fighting conflict of her hue,
How white and red each other did destroy:
But now her cheek was pale, and by and by
It flashed forth fire, as lightning from the sky. (345-48)

This token might be considered as Venus’s love condition, which first was red and sexual as she tried to have an affair with Adonis, but later on it turned to white or platonic love, when she made an effort to dissuade the beloved from going to hunt by her nude body.

In Oates’ work, the family reactions, too, undergo changes from love to shock and thence to disgust. Matthew is loved as he is a son, husband, father, and salesperson. At the time of disease, his wife, Florence, cries; Mr. Overmeyer visits him in the bed, for Matthew has been his best sales clerk never asking for any favor and having the record of selling the most cars. The next phase is represented by Vicky, his eldest daughter, who believes that she carries the stench with her to school. Finally, Ronnie, embarrassed when others want to know how things are at their home, at last decides: ‘The hell with Father: let him stink’ (315). The difference between the two stories is that Venus loves Adonis first for herself, then for himself, yet here Matthew is loved and loathed for themselves.

At first, Florence shocked to find her husband metamorphosed starts crying, a sense of sympathy that is shared by Venus, when she “hears the hounds are at a bay”, finding out that the boar has torn her beloved’s body, so she “[a]ppeals her senses” (877-82), meaning ‘makes faint’ (Burrow 221). Then, Venus at Adonis corpse says that your death was your due: ‘quoth she, ‘this is my spite, / That, thou being dead, the day should yet be light’” (1133-35).

However, although Matthew begins to stink, Adonis becomes a flower: “She bows her head the new-sprung flower to smell, / Comparing it to her Adonis’ breath” (1171-72). Despite the situation for Mathew, being abhorred, he then is taken out of the house to a hospital implying a sense of pity toward him. Adonis, too, after the above curse, as Venus says, “within her bosom it [the flower] shall dwell” (1173):

‘Lo, in this hollow cradle take thy rest:
My throbbing heart shall rock thee day and night.
There shall not be one minute in an hour
Wherein I will not kiss my sweet love’s flower.’ (1185-88)

Although imitating their predecessors, both pieces at the same time change their forerunners’ crucial points. Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis following Ovid’s Metamorphoses repeatedly explores the ways in which sexual desire does not find fulfillment, and even love is not mutual. Ovid’s tale of Echo and Narcissus conveys this matter as the former longs for the latter, but he gazes at his own image (Burrow 19). Echoing this tale, Venus is fond of echoing figures like epizeuxis, the emphatic repetition, for example “Say shall we, shall we?” (586), or remodeling, “‘Give me my hand’, saith he … / ’Give me my heart’, saith she” (373-4). However, there in Ovid’s Book 10, Venus falls in love with Adonis and wins him, but here not only misses him corporeally but also finds him killed by the boar, so lost forever. Contrary to Ovid who embraced the idea of fate immutability, where Venus as a goddess is successful in dissuading Adonis from going to hunt, Shakespeare shows the opposite, and her prediction in the form of foreshadowing does not work. Likewise, Oates “Metamorphosis” stands for an ever-changing universe, rather than a lower status worth abasement. In the light of such a philosophy, dying then signals a change into a new form (Loeb 151).

Role reversal or metamorphosis in role could be a pertinent issue. In Ovid’s work, Venus is not disobeyed; there, she is a goddess who prides on her success over Mars, but now she is begging Adonis’ attention. Furthermore, the way Adonis is described looks like a reversal in gender as well; “Rose-cheeked” (3), “Thrice fairer than [Venus]” (7), or “Stain to all nymphs” (9), he is wooed by “a bold-faced suitor” (6). He is actually put and posed in place of a femme fatale when she is, rather than a lower status worth abasement. In Ovid who embraced the idea of fate immutability, where Venus as a goddess is successful in dissuading Adonis from going to hunt, Shakespeare shows the opposite, and her prediction in the form of foreshadowing does not work. Likewise, Oates “Metamorphosis” stands for an ever-changing universe, rather than a lower status worth abasement. In the light of such a philosophy, dying then signals a change into a new form (Loeb 151).

For Adonis and Matthew, their jobs are of paramount importance, something that results in their transformation. In the poem, Adonis by no means is persuaded to give up his job of hunting, being more important to him than love-making with the goddess of love, although he is a young man, usually full of lust. In effect, he prefers his own occupation, hunting, to being chased, hunted, by Venus. Re Matthew, his desk in the showroom is where for the first time he has a (day)dream. When after four days Mr. Overmeyer comes to meet him in the sickroom, the visit reinforcing the significance of his professional identity, he suggests doing his job on the bed, despite his malady. The number of his household, as well, his wife and five children plus his visiting parents who remind him of his duties, informs us of the purport of his vocation as a breadwinner. Even his haunting dreams make him think that “maybe the dreams were Mr. Overmeyer’s” (461). This is related to the concept of pressure in both as the next similitude. While Matthew does his duty vis-à-vis his large family, he feels to be under economical pressure. On the other side, Adonis is sexually pressed; in fact, the poem speaks of Venus’s obstinacy to the extent of making Adonis exhausted and causing him to let her steal some kisses.
In addition, Shakespeare’s narration keeps vacillating between the third-person point of view and Venus’s first-person. In Oates’, in a like vein and for the same purpose, structure has employed the technique of shifting points of view to reverberate the reactions of the family. Although the pronoun used in this story is first-person plural, the person changes:

Mother, Len, and Vicky fed him. The doctor showed them how. The rest of us were kept downstairs. Bickering. Tommy throwing himself around. Ronnie yelled: “Goddamn you little bastards! I could kill you!” Father upstairs, drooling. The best thing to feed him, Dr. Crane said, is baby food. Why not? He did not spit the food out, but some-times it came back out by itself. (315, emphasis added)

Here, we understand that Sally is the speaker by method of elimination. Even, occasionally we have two narrators at the same time by use of italics. This double perspective also reinforces the existence of the inner world of the protagonist, as it is the case about Venus: The poem’s time scheme is more psychological rather than numerological. Venus soliloquizes that “A summer’s day will seem an hour but short, / Being wasted in such time-beguiling sport” (23-4).

Dreams, which are a metamorphosis in psychological condition from consciousness to unconsciousness and should usually occur in a state when one is freed of his daily concerns, serve as a troublesome factor in both stories. Matthew wakes “from a daydream that was not his” (453). Then, it is described as “[t]his strange dream had been about sleep. A dream about sleep. There had been a body, a kind of mummy, lying very still beneath heavy covers. Sheets pulled up to the chin” (455). Here, the “sleep” along with “mummy”, “lying very still beneath heavy covers”, and “sheets pulled up to the chin” put forth the shade meaning of death. In the classic piece, besides, Venus has a dream that not merely is about Adonis, not herself, but death:

And more than so, presenteth to mine eye
The picture of an angry chafing boar,
Under whose sharp fangs, on his back doth lie
An image like thyself, all stained with gore,
Whose blood upon the fresh flowers being shed
Doth make them droop with grief, and hang the head.
What should I do, seeing thee so indeed
That tremble at th’ imagination?
The thought of it doth make my faint heart bleed,
And fear doth teach it divination:
I prophesy thy death, my living sorrow,
If thou encounter with the boar tomorrow. (661-72)

Another similarity lies in Matthew’s dream in which he gradually distances himself from his ordinary life, hence foregrounding the events to come. Venus’s dream, as well, foreshadows Adonis’s death by a boar. There exists a relevant metaphor in Venus and Adonis, which is somewhat arcane in Oates’ work if one should not have read Kafka’s. Dreams are symbols of a yearning for the “self”, that is, in dreams one carves the layers of his consciousness. Indeed, what causes Matthew’s future death, or reverting to his soul or self, commenced from his dreams. In turn, it is not surprising if we find Kafka’s Gregor seeking transcendence or “radiance”, a word repeatedly mentioned in Kafka, which is attained by his metamorphosis. Shakespeare’s Adonis, too, leaves sexuality or bestiality to transcend himself; as a result, he turns into a flower. This matches what Oates says, “The hero must die in order that a transcendence may take place that is somehow exterior to him” (New Haven 252). It is significant that in both cases metamorphosis occurs for men, and women, Venus and Florence, are life-prompters as they symbolize love and productivity.

Rather than merely concentrating on the individual, Oates seems to underline the wider effects of change on family with the aim of pointing out the continuation of life. The last two paragraphs read:

One day one of us came home from school and couldn’t find mother. He walked through the house calling, “Mother?…” and then saw her out the back window. He ran out, back to the fence. Mother was digging in the weeds. A hoot weedy garden, the smell of earth and sunlight and plants and Mother’s warm dress, all yellow and purple streaks ....

Mother? Mother?” She let the hoe fall back against the fence and opened her arms for an embrace. (463, sic)

Everything after Matthew’s death appears normal and life or, in Oates’ words, the “supremely ordinary life” (Woman 215) continues. In like manner, Shakespeare’s Adonis’s turning into a flower as a live creature denotes the continuation of life.
References