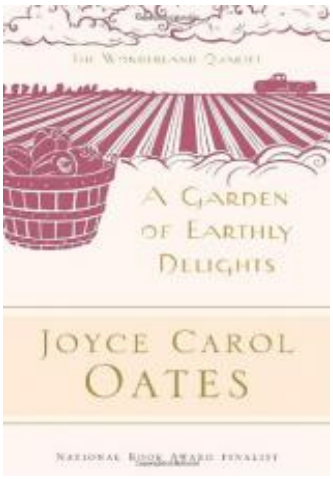
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# A Garden of Earthly Delights

by Joyce Carol Oates




## About the Book

In her second novel, Joyce Carol Oates, author of many bestselling novels, including **We Were the Mulvaneys** and **Blonde**, created one of her most memorable heroines, Clara, the beautiful daughter of migrant farmworkers. Intent upon rising above her haphazard life of violence and poverty, Clara struggles for independence while relying on four men to fashion her destiny: her father, a hardened laborer simmering with resentment; Lowry, who rescues the teenage Clara from her family and offers her a first glimpse of love; Revere, the wealthy married man who promises Clara stability; and Swan, Clara's son, who bears the burden of his mother's mistaken identity.

For this Modern Library 20th Century Rediscovery edition, Joyce Carol Oates has revised and rewritten three fourths of the novel, originally published in 1966, a feat comparable to Henry James's revisions of his early novels in 1908, when he was at the height of his artistic powers. With a new Afterword by the author, this is the definitive edition of an early masterpiece by one of our greatest living writers.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** By focusing on the stories of Carleton, Clara, and Swan, Oates allows her readers to become intimately familiar with three of **A Garden of Earthly Delights**'s characters. Which character do you most empathize with and why?

**2.** In your opinion, why is Carleton indifferent to most of his children and what makes him particularly fond of his beloved Clara?

**3.** How are migrant workers stigmatized in the text and how do the Walpoles both conform to and break away from these stereotypes?

**4.** Lowry and Clara's relationship begins rather unusually. What did you make of Lowry when he first appeared in

Clara's life? How did your perception of him change later in the novel?

**5.** **A Garden of Earthly Delights** chronicles the lives of characters who are haunted by their individual pasts and by the pasts of their ancestors. What examples of this can you find in the text?

**6.** The parent-child relationship is central to the novel: sometimes the intimacy between a mother and child mimics that usually found between a husband and wife; at other points in the novel, romantic relationships in the novel take on a peculiar father-daughter dynamic. Discuss this blurring of boundaries in Clara's various relationships with men.

**7.** Oates reveals, "To Clara, a man's love was no sign of his strength but rather of his weakness, something you wanted from him but then had to feel a little sorry about taking." In several instances in the text, love is explicitly described as a weakness. Discuss how this theme is subtly weaved throughout the text.

**8.** Oates describes Clara's frustration at her lack of education by saying, "Clara was thinking: if she could read better?if she could write?if she didn't have to struggle so with words, things would come easier for her. There were times when an idea brushed her mind, but she couldn't seize it. Like a butterfly fluttering out of her reach." What role does the thirst for knowledge play in Clara's life and later in the life of her son Swan?

**9.** Oates explains why Swan suddenly loses interest in reading and learning in the following lines: "All knowledge is a drug, Swan believed. And all drugs can be addictive. He would fight it. He knew how. He'd isolated it?this sensation as of imminent helplessness?as the way I which a fetus grows in its mother's belly: tiny head taking form, tiny arms, legs, torso, fish-body becoming human, sucking its energy from the encasing flesh and growing, always growing." Discuss the characters in the novel and their struggles against helplessness or various forms of addiction.

**10.** When Clark confides in his stepmother about Jonathan's problematic behavior, Clara misses the point, saying, "I'm sorry to hear this, Clark. I?like Jonathan?.I think he likes me?" What does her response reveal about her character and her relationship to the Revere family (of which she is now a part)?

**11.** A lack of choices and opportunities is usually connected to poverty, as evident in the beginning of the novel. However, in several instances, Swan records his frustration at being a member of the Revere family, where "nothing is left to chance" and "the only way out of it was the way Robert had gone, by accident, or Jonathan had taken on purpose." Discuss why Swan, who, through has mother's marriage, has acquired prestige, an education, and wealth, feels trapped by his newfound position in society.

**12.** What draws Clara and Judd together and how is Clara's relationship with Judd different from her relationship with other men in her life?

**13.** Oates discusses Swan's reluctance to form intimate relationships, "Swan understood then that he could not talk to her (Loretta) and if he tried he would only disturb her. He could not talk to his mother either, and of course not to his father, and never to Clark and never to his teachers, and it made sense that he could not now talk to Loretta?" Describe Swan's growing feelings of isolation from others that begin in his childhood and culminate in his final act of violence.

**14.** In her Afterword, Oates explains that "though such terms as 'victims of abuse' ?'abuse survivors'?are clichés at the present time, they did not exist in the era of **A Garden of Earthly Delights.** It was not uncommon in certain quarters for

men to beat their families and remain morally as well as legally blameless; though sexual harassment, sexual molestation, and rape may have been commonplace, the vocabulary to define them was not, and it would have been a rare case reported, and a yet rarer case taken seriously by the police." In the light of this knowledge, how do you think the reader's reception of this novel upon its original publication in 1966 was different from that of today's reader?

## Author Bio

Joyce Carol Oates is a recipient of a National Humanities Medal awarded by President Barack Obama, the National Book Critics Circle?s Ivan Sandrof Life Achievement Award, the National Book Award in Fiction, the Jerusalem Prize, the Prix Femina, the Cino Del Duca World Prize, and is a five-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. She has written some of the most enduring fiction of our time, including the bestsellers BLONDE and WE WERE THE MULVANEYS. She is the Roger S. Berlind ?52 Distinguished Professor of the Humanities Emerita at Princeton University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2024, she won the Raymond Chandler Lifetime Achievement Award given to ?a master of the thriller and noir literary genre.?

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