Title: Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"
Author(s): Marie Mitchell Olesen Urbanski
Source: ***EXPLORING Short Stories.*** Detroit: Gale, 2003. From *Student Resources in Context*.
Document Type: Critical essay

Full Text:
Full Text:

[Urbanski teaches at the University of Maine at Orono. In the following excerpt, she reads "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" as the story "of a young person coming to grips with externally determined fate."]

Fifteen-year-old Connie's acquiescence to Arnold Friend's threat-ridden seduction is an appropriate finale to Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" in a narrative which, upon careful analysis, suggests existential allegory. Many critics have classified Oates's work as realistic or naturalistic, whereas Samuel J. Pickering categorizes her short stories as subjective romanticism to a fault. Most, however, agree she is writing in the tradition of Dreiser, Faulkner, and O'Conner, but few have acknowledged the allegorical nature of her work. Veiling the intent of "Where Are You Going... " in realistic detail, Oates sets up the framework of a religious allegory—the seduction of Eve—and with it renders a contemporary existential initiation theme—that of a young person coming to grips with externally determined fate.

The first paragraph introduces the vain, spoiled daughter of middle class parents, "She knew she was pretty and that was everything." The sense of power which her fresh desirable sexuality provides her is the basis for her feeling of a self-directed life. When she and her girlfriend visit a local "hang-out" and reject the overtures of an undesirable boy, "it made them feel good to be able to ignore him."

From the outset of the narrative, members of Connie's family recognize their powerlessness and thus their difference from her. Her mother and sister are not attractive, so they do not really count; and her father, who spends most of his time at work, is weak. Rose Marie Burwell's interpretation of *A Garden of Earthly Delights* as moral allegory has never been applied to "Where Are You Going...." This brief study, however, seeks to elucidate "Where Are You Going..." as existential allegory. It seems evident that members of Connie's family embody much of the same resigned acceptance of "excluded alternatives" as do the characters in *A Garden*. Burwell argues [in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 15 (1973)] that each of the major characters in *A Garden* realizes that he is "part of a drama whose outcome has largely been determined but remains unknown." Thus, in refusing to attend a family picnic, Connie is rejecting not only her family's company, but the settled order of their existence—in which recognition of "excluded alternatives" is tantamount to acceptance of their lives.

The popular music which permeates "Where Are You Going..." is at the same time the narrative's *zeitgeist* and *leitmotiv*, serving as the former in order to maintain plausible realism, and the latter to establish allegorical significance. The recurring music then, while ostensibly innocuous realistic detail, is in fact, the vehicle of Connie's seduction and because of its intangibility, not immediately recognizable as such. Attesting to the significance of the *zeitgeist* in this narrative, "Where Are You Going..." is dedicated to Bob Dylan, who contributed to making music almost religious in dimension among the youth. It is music—instead of an apple— which lures Connie, quickens her heartbeat; and popular lyrics which constitute Friend's conversation and cadence—his promises, threats, and the careless confidence with which he seduces her.

Connie fuses unexplored sexuality with the mystery of the music when, at home, she thinks about her encounters: "But all the boys fell back and dissolved into a single face that was not even a face but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music."

Before Friend arrives, Connie is bored and perhaps regrets not having gone to the cook-out with her family, so she goes in the house and turns on the radio "to drown out the quiet." Friend understands that music is sexual currency by pointing out his companion's radio when he invites her for a ride. And he succeeds in breaking her conversational ice by discussing the merits of a commonly admired singer.

Oates employs musical metaphor in her description of Friend. "He spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song." Intrinsic to Friend's function is the fact that he himself is a record. While waiting for Connie to accept his ride offer, "he began to mark time with the music from Ellie's radio." Even their union is presaged by the sexually pointed observation of Connie listening "to the music from her radio and the boy's blend together."

The images which overtly suggest religious allegory while more subtly supporting the existential theme, are interspersed throughout the work. When Connie and her girlfriend first enter the local "hang-out" where the girls and boys meet, they feel "as if they were entering a sacred building" where background music seems like that of a "church service." The day

of the cook-out, which is significant both because it is the day of her defiance of her parents and the day of her capitulation to Friend, is a Sunday. "None of them bothered with church" identifies her spiritual vacuity. When Connie first hears Friend's car enter the driveway, she whispers "Christ," as later Friend evokes the name of Christ with a curse when she threatens to call the police.

Friend is a strange syncretism of O'Conner's Bible-pedaling Manley Pointer in manner, and Satan in appearance. When Connie first observes Friend, she notices his "shaggy black hair," his "jalopy painted gold," and his broad grin. As the narrative progresses, his features appear more ominous, his hair like a wig, his slitted eyes "like chips of broken glass" with "thick black tarlike" lashes when not covered by mirrored, but masking sunglasses; and he looks older. Like Milton's Satan [in *Paradise Lost*, IX] "crested aloft and Carbuncle his Eyes with burnished Neck of verdant Gold, erect," Friend posited atop his golden jalopy, has a muscular neck which suggests the reptilian, as does the fact that he "slid" rather than stepped out of the car. His feet resemble the devil's cloven hooves: "One of his boots was at a strange angle, as if his foot wasn't in it."

Friend's mesmeric influence on Connie further supports my contention that he represents a superhuman force. "Don't you know who I am?" he asks in an eery fashion, as if she had encountered him before, as one does evil. She is unable to make a telephone call for help because he is watching her; she bumps against a piece of furniture in a familiar room; and when he commands her to do what would otherwise seem an irrational act, to place her hand on her heart to understand its flaccidity, she readily obeys. His directives culminate when he convinces her, "What else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in."

The recurring use of a twentieth-century symbol of irony—the false smile—further veils the existential meaning in realistic narrative. Over the student drive-in hangs a "revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft." And Friend intersperses smiles with threats. "`Connie, don't fool around with me. I mean—I mean, don't fool *around*,' he said shaking his head. He laughed incredulously." Friend demands a smile from his conquest as well: "Now come out through the kitchen with me, honey, and let's see a smile."

In the end, Oates makes it clear that Connie, in capitulating to Friend, is not simply surrendering her virginal innocence, but bowing to absolute forces which her youthful coquetry cannot direct—absolute forces over which she has no control. At this point she thinks for the first time in her life that her heart "was nothing that was hers... but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either."

In the seduction which Friend engineers, Connie is merely the personification of the female he wishes to dominate, to be taller than, to despoil. The phrases he delivers from his musical repertoire are not even tailored to Connie: "`My sweet little blue-eyed girl' he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes."

In the presentation of this complex narrative, the major characters represent two distinct personifications in the dual levels of the allegory. It is apparent that Friend represents the devil who tempts the chaste yet morally vacuous girl-victim. Yet upon closer analysis, it appears that Connie takes the active part as *Everyman* experiencing the inevitable realization of her insignificance and powerlessness while Friend, who personifies the Erinyes, is merely the catalyst.

Although Oates uses the trappings of a realist to craft plausible characters—a dreamy teenaged girl, a hypnotic Manson-like man—and renders a facsimile of awkward adolescent behavior and speech, with contemporary youth's devotion to popular music as a convincing *zeitgeist*, this must not obscure her design. She presents an allegory which applies existential initiation rites to the Biblical seduction myth to represent *Everyman's* transition from the illusion of free will to the realization of externally determined fate.

"Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 15, no. 2, Spring, 1978, pp. 200–03.