

Title: Overview of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

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[Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses some of the different ways in which critics have interpreted "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"]

Since Joyce Carol Oates's phenomenal appearance on the literary scene in the mid 1960s, she has certainly been one of America's most prolific and talked-about writers. The author of more than twenty novels and numerous volumes of short stories, poems, plays, and essays, she has drawn the attention of readers and critics alike. Whatever one's opinion of Oates's work may be—and certainly some of it has been better received than other portions of it—it is not possible to ignore her importance as a writer, particularly one who chronicles life in twentieth-century America. Oates has been compared to Fyodor Dostoevsky, Honoré de Balzac, and William Faulkner for her efforts to portray an entire culture of people. It is not surprising that she has been compared to these greats, for Oates also tries to explain some of the mysteries of life, believing that a "writer's job, ideally, is to act as the conscience of his race."

In her essays on D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats, Oates has expressed her interest in "the richness of pain and chaos." Certainly, these elements are apparent in Oates's own writing, and many critics have commented on the bleak nature of her fiction and on the many unpleasant things that happen to her characters. Oates has noted, "People frequently misunderstand serious art because it is often violent and unattractive. I wish the world were a prettier place, but I wouldn't be honest as a writer if I ignored the actual conditions around me." These words apply particularly well to one of her best-known stories, which was based on the case of an Arizona serial killer who preyed on teenage girls. The prize-winning "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" depicts fifteen-year-old Connie, a "typical" American girl, who is seduced into what we assume will be her rape and murder. Oates mirrors reality in this horrifying portrayal, stinting only on the physical details while deftly exploring Connie's mental terror.

As with much of Oates's fiction, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" uses the technique of psychological realism, funneling the narrative through Connie's consciousness, along with elements of gothic horror, to chilling effect. The story has been subject to differing interpretations by various critics. It has been seen as an inverted fairy tale in which Connie is joined not with Prince Charming but with the Prince of Darkness. These readers have pointed out similarities between Arnold Friend and the devil: his disguise, his supernatural knowledge of the whereabouts of Connie's family, his ability to lure Connie to him against her will, even his very name, which is by no coincidence close to "Arch Fiend." Others see it as a tale of initiation into evil with the end depicting Connie's acceptance of the depraved American culture. Here Connie inhabits a world of moral impoverishment in which only the false and tawdry are revered. The loss of Connie to Arnold Friend is thus not only the story of one girl's fatal misperception of appearances but also a representation of a loss of innocence.

There are still others who read the story as a feminist allegory which suggests that young women of today, like the generations that have come before them, are headed into sexual bondage. When Connie, the innocent female, walks out of the house to meet what may be her demise, she also represents the spiritual death of women at the moment they give up their independence to the desire of the sexually threatening male.

In addition to reading "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" for its critical interpretation, it can also be enjoyed as a finely crafted story. Oates's control over her narrative is clearly evident as she introduces a protagonist who is familiar enough to earn the reader's empathy, yet still able to surprise. Connie, despite her shallowness, is ultimately likeable. She is suffering, not from a malicious desire to be cruel, but merely from romantic delusions in her search for a "sweet, gentle" love "the way it was in movies and promised in songs." Connie's behavior, when she is in the public eye, testifies to this need: her voice is "high-pitched and nervous"; her face "pleased and expectant" as she enters the drive-in; while sitting at the counter her shoulders are "rigid with excitement." Whereas Connie is proud of herself for mingling in the world of older teenagers and for fooling her "simple" mother, the reader sees the danger she can encounter in being places where she doesn't belong. Thus when Arnold, the boy at the drive-in who warns Connie "Gonna get you, babe," shows up at her house, the terror builds inexorably.

Oates, however, does not point to a simplistic reading of the story as Connie's adolescent dream turned into a

nightmare. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" invites multiple readings, and Oates emphasizes throughout the story the importance and duplicity of identity. Nothing in the story is what it seems. Connie's parents, though they appear quite typical, provide no moral guidance. Her mother is not really concerned with Connie's habits and lifestyle but argues with her daughter "over something of little value to either of them." Connie's father is distant and "didn't bother talking much" so, like the father of Connie's friend, he can hardly ask the crucial questions to keep his daughter secure: "Where are you going?" or "Where have you been?" The very place that Connie and her friends revere as a sanctuary, the drive-in restaurant, is described as a "sacred building," which is in reality "fly-infested."

Everything about Connie—her clothing, her walk, her mouth, her laugh—also testifies to these two sides. Connie, however, only values outward appearances; she is always "checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right." Connie's identity stems from a rigid belief in physical beauty—"she knew she was pretty and that was everything"—and she even thinks her mother prefers her to her plainer older sister solely because of her looks. Since Connie so values appearances, she holds others to these shallow standards and uses what she sees on the surface as her criteria by which to judge them. This superficial view of the world leads her to embrace the drive-in restaurant, "where older kids hung out" and where Arnold Friend marks her with his "X." Then, because at first she "liked the way he was dressed," she does not immediately urge Arnold Friend to leave her driveway, and she stays talking with him, thus allowing him the time to create a physical space of psychological terror from which she cannot escape.

In contrast to Connie, who has one identity for home and one for "anywhere that was not home," Arnold has the ability to take on whatever role he feels will woo her away from home. When Arnold arrives at Connie's house, she fixes her hair before approaching the screen door, demonstrating her belief that she will be judged by her looks. Her query "'Who the hell do you think you are?'" does not relate any suspicion but is simply adolescent disinterest, a teenager's way of being "careful to show no interest or pleasure" while leaving herself time to decide if she likes him. Arnold reacts in kind, talking in a "fast, bright monotone." Despite his affected teenage talk, however, his disguise starts to show through. The crazy wig, the lifts in his boots, the face with "plastered make-up" all make it apparent that he is only pretending to be 18 as he begins to speak more frankly about his desires. He thus takes on another role, that of the sexual psychopath who uses his knowledge of a person's weaknesses to bring his victims to him. Arnold makes himself acceptable to Connie through that which she values, superficial appearance, and then uses his own depraved power to keep her with him.

Connie, of course, does not recognize the story's demonic elements when the reader does. These references quickly add up: her utterances of "hell" and "Christ" when Arnold shows up; his supernatural awareness of the details of Connie's life, particularly his ability to "see" the family barbecue; his vampiric inability to enter Connie's house. What is important in these references is not whether Arnold is, in fact, the devil, but that he is so closely linked to the master of evil. The similarities between Arnold and the devil testify to his nature and his capacity to harm Connie. In the face of Connie's increasing terror, Arnold grows stronger. He cuts off her future path of escape when he says, "I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try and get away... because you'll know you can't," leaving her to see the futility in trying to get away. He shows her how fragile her world is, that the lock on the screen door can't protect her. Her home is "nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time." Arnold shows her the weaknesses in the things she thought represented security and safety.

Arnold is successful because he is able to get past Connie's "at-home" personality—cynical, distant, superior—with his false show of allegiance. Unfortunately for Connie, by the time she ignores the superficial and concerns herself with what lies underneath Arnold's teenage mask, it is too late. When Connie leaves the house for the last time, she has lost her own identity to Arnold's desires. She is filled only with "emptiness." Even her body is no longer hers. As she pushes open the screen door it seems as if "she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair." And as Arnold, who certainly will reveal the more violent natures of his personality after he drives off with his prize, waits for her, he steals away any last vestige of her personality by singing "'My sweet little blue-eyed girl,'" taking no notice that Connie's eyes are actually brown. He has stripped her down, leaving nothing but a shell, a body that he will abuse and then discard. Soon, in addition to losing her identity, Connie will probably lose her life to Arnold.

It is interesting to note that the film version of this story, *Smooth Talk*, does not remain true to Oates's ending. Instead of Connie succumbing to the pernicious allure of Arnold, the film-version Connie rejects Arnold and returns to her family. Oates, while praising the film, "wished, perhaps, for a different ending ... but I suppose that the ending I wrote was simply not translatable; or palatable." It is more likely that the ending was changed to pacify the viewing public, for in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Oates certainly achieves what critic Alfred Kazin calls a "sweetly brutal sense of what American experience is really like."

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