


Plot Summary: "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

 DISCovering Authors, 2003

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates was inspired to write "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" after reading an account in *Life* magazine of a charismatic but insecure young man who had enticed and then killed several girls in Tucson, Arizona, during the early 1960s. Transformed into fiction, this story was first published by the literary journal *Epoch* in 1966 and was included in Oates's 1970 short story collection *The Wheel of Love*. Its acclaim was so swift and certain that, as early as 1972, critic Walter Sullivan noted that it was "one of her most widely reprinted stories and justly so." Along with the story's frequent appearance in textbooks and anthologies, Oates herself republished it in 1974 as the title story for *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America*. This collection's subtitle points to Oates's ongoing interest in adolescence, especially the psychological and social turmoil that arises during this difficult period. Her preoccupation with these topics, along with her keen sense of the special pressures facing teenagers in contemporary society, is evident in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

This story is seen by many as one of Oates's best and in the words of scholar G. F. Waller, it is "one of the masterpieces of the genre." Oates's realism often garners such praise; critics and readers alike have commended the presentation of the story's central character, Connie, as a typical teenager who may be disliked, pitied, or even identified with. A similar believability is instilled in Arnold Friend's manipulative stream of conversation and its psychological effects on a vulnerable teenager. Critics also praise the story for its evocative language, its use of symbols, and an ambiguous conclusion which allows for several interpretations of the story's meaning. In 1988, a film version of the story was released entitled *Smooth Talk*.

Plot

Connie is a fifteen-year-old teenager growing up in suburbia in the 1960s. She is preoccupied with typical teenage concerns: her looks and popular music. She argues with her mother, makes fun of her older, plainer sister, and hangs out with her friends in restaurants, movie theaters, and shopping malls. During these summertime social ventures, she and her friends try to attract the attention of the older high-school boys. One evening, while on a date, Connie notices a boy with black hair and a gold "jalopy"—a beat-up sports car—staring at her.

One Sunday while her parents and sister attend a family barbecue, Connie, contemptuous of family gatherings, elects to stay home and wash her hair. As she sits in the backyard letting her hair dry, she

thinks about the boy she had been with the night before. Later, while listening to the radio inside the house, she hears a car coming up the driveway. Thinking that her family would not be home so soon, she goes to the window and sees that it is not her parents' car, but a gold jalopy that she does not remember having seen before. Her heart pounds, her fingers straighten her hair, and when the horn taps several times, she goes to the side door to meet the visitor.

There are two men in the car, and Connie watches them from the screen door. She now recognizes the driver as the one who had stared at her at the restaurant. He asks "I ain't late, am I?" as if they had a date. Connie makes small talk with him while deciding whether or not she likes him. He introduces himself as Arnold Friend, the other boy as Ellie, and he shows off his car, which is painted with words, pictures, and numbers. He invites her to go for a ride.

Arnold Friend seems to know many things about Connie: her name, who her friends are, and the fact that her family is gone for the afternoon. Connie notices that an expression painted on his car—"man the flying saucers"—is outdated; it was popular the year before. She also realizes that, though he wears the right clothes and talks like all the kids, he seems older and out of place. His hair appears to be a wig, he wears lifts in his boots, and his face looks as if it is caked with makeup. Though he claims to be eighteen, Connie suspects that he is at least thirty. When Arnold's friend Ellie turns around, Connie sees he looks like a forty-year-old baby. Connie realizes something is wrong and tells them to go away.

Arnold refuses to leave without her. Connie threatens that her father will return, but Arnold knows that he will be at the barbecue all afternoon—he even knows where it is and what Connie's sister is wearing. His conversation becomes more intimate: he calls her "lover" and talks about having sex with her and holding her so tightly she won't think about trying get away. Connie becomes frightened and backs away from the door. She threatens to call the police, but Arnold, who has pledged not to come in the house, threatens to come in after her if she touches the phone. When she says that her father is coming back to get her, Arnold knows she is lying. Ellie asks if he should pull out the phone lines.

Arnold tells Ellie to shut up and urges Connie to come outside. He threatens to harm her whole family if she does not cooperate. When Ellie again asks him about the phone, Arnold becomes irritated and lists off a series of slang phrases from different decades, trying to find the one that is current. He continues to threaten Connie's family and implies that he has killed one of the neighbors. Connie asks what he is going to do with her and he says he has a few things in mind, but that she will learn to like him. In fear, Connie stumbles her way to the phone but is unable to dial; she simply screams into the receiver. When she stops, Arnold is standing by the door. Her fear is replaced by emptiness, and she understands that she will leave the house and never return. She approaches the screen door and watches herself opening it, feeling as if she no longer inhabits her own body. She walks out into the sunlight where Arnold waits, assuming a mocking gesture of welcome.

Characters

Connie : Fifteen-year-old Connie exhibits the confusing, often superficial behavior typical of a teenage girl facing the difficult transition from girlhood to womanhood. She is rebellious, vain, self-centered, and deceitful. She is caught between her roles as a daughter, friend, sister, and object of sexual desire,

uncertain of which one represents the real her: "Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home." She is deeply romantic, as shown by her awareness of popular song lyrics, but she is interested more in the concept of having a boyfriend than the boyfriend himself. She sees the boys who exhibit interest in her primarily as conquests who "dissolved into a single face that was not even a face but an idea." All of these traits make her vulnerable to Arnold Friend's manipulation. At first she is flattered by his attentions, unable to realize that he is in fact a menacing force. Connie's superficiality leads her into a situation in which she becomes powerless over the forces to which she is naively attracted.

A more complex reading of Connie's character, one that includes a glimmer of hope for reaching beyond her own self-centeredness, can be found in an article by Joyce Carol Oates. In speaking of the ending to the story, Oates points out that Connie is "capable of an unexpected gesture of heroism" when she believes her compliance with Arnold will prevent him from harming her family.

June : Connie's responsible older sister, June, is twenty-four years old, works as a secretary at Connie's high school, and lives at home with her parents. Described as "plain and chunky and steady," she conforms where Connie rebels, serving as the standard to which Connie's own behavior is always compared and found wanting. Connie believes she is better than her sister because she is more beautiful.

Connie's mother : Connie's mother frequently nags her youngest daughter and often makes comparisons between her and June, her well-behaved oldest daughter. However, she also feels a closeness with Connie that makes them "sometimes, over coffee,... almost friends." Connie's mother "had been pretty once too," and therefore may prefer Connie (or so her daughter believes) to the more matronly looking June. The mother is uneasy with her daughter's behavior, most likely because she realizes that Connie's actions and manner of dress are more promiscuous than that befitting a fifteen-year-old girl. But when the mother tries to discipline her daughter, Connie believes the conflict stems from her mother's resentment of her youth and beauty. Nevertheless, the mother tries her best to trust her daughter, and that trust is interpreted by Connie as "simplicity" because she thinks her mother believes her lies about "where she's going" and "where she's been." Nevertheless, the mother has managed to form a deep connection with her daughter. Near the end of the story, Connie "[cries] for her mother" and thinks "I'm not going to see my mother again," demonstrating that Connie's rejection of her mother is a product of teenage defiance.

Arnold Friend : Initially portrayed as "a boy with shaggy black hair, in a convertible jalopy painted gold" who notices Connie at the drive-in restaurant, Arnold Friend assumes many identities throughout the story. He is the sweet-talking suitor, whose appearance Connie approves of because of his "familiar face." He is also a potential rapist and murderer who uses psychological manipulation to appeal to Connie's vanity and her need to be liked by men. Perhaps the most terrifying thing about Arnold Friend is that he blends elements of romance—"I took a special interest in you, such a pretty girl"—and violence—"We ain't leaving until you come with us"—in order to appeal to a young woman unsure of who she is. Arnold Friend's name is a dark joke, alternately A. Friend, or without too much transformation, A. Fiend. Many critics have suggested that Arnold Friend is the devil in disguise. He has trouble balancing on his small feet—hooves?—and the make-up on his face makes him look younger than he really is. He tells Connie that he's eighteen, although she estimates that he must be at least thirty. He calls an "X" he draws in the air "his sign," and knows that Connie's family is away for the afternoon at a family barbecue and recites their whereabouts in astonishing detail.

Ellie Oscar : Arnold's brown-haired, red-faced cohort, Ellie Oscar initially seems to be a silent and harmless hanger-on, content to listen to his transistor radio as Arnold speaks with Connie. Later, he becomes a more ominous figure with a violent potential, as he offers to "pull out the phone" and prevent Connie from calling for help, then produces a weapon, prompting Arnold's order to "put that away." Connie's changing perception of Ellie mirrors her changing perspective on Arnold. Further, Ellie's status as loyal follower and accomplice further demonstrates Arnold's power to fascinate.

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"Plot Summary: '*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*.'" *DISCovering Authors*. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Student Resources in Context*. Web. 15 Jan. 2016.

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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ2101302132
