"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

by
Joyce Carol Oates

Born in Lockport, New York, on June 16, 1938, Joyce Carol Oates published her first collection of short stories in 1963. She became noted for her portrayals of evil and violence in contemporary American society. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is one of her most discussed and examined pieces of work. The story, which deals with such troubling issues as sexuality, rape, and adolescence in American culture, has been the center of much feminist debate. Although the story takes place in an unspecified place and time, details in the plot indicate that the setting is an American suburb sometime during the late 1950s or early 1960s.

THE LITERARY WORK

A short story set in a suburban American town during the late 1950s; first published in 1966.

SYNOPSIS

A flirtatious fifteen-year-old girl becoming aware of her own sexuality is coerced into submitting to the whims of an older man.

Events in History at the Time the Short Story Takes Place

The age of rock 'n' roll. The period from 1954 to 1963 is considered to be the first decade of rock 'n' roll music. This new musical genre appealed almost exclusively to teenagers, whom it helped isolate as an independent social group. In the book *That Old Time Rock and Roll* Richard Aquila writes:

> The new music provided a means to teen solidarity.... Rock highlighted the age gap between teenagers and adults, and dealt expressly with the teenage experience.... It also echoed and shaped the youth's thoughts and actions.
>
> (Aquila, pp. 18-20)

Some of the popular rock stars of this early period included Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Bo Diddley, Bill Haley and the Comets, the Coasters, Dion and the Belmonts, Chubby Checker, Ricky Nelson, Del Shannon, the Ronettes, and, of course, Elvis Presley. Many popular songs of the era addressed teenagers directly—for example, "A Teenager's Romance" (Ricky Nelson); "A Teenager in Love" (Dion and the Belmonts); "Teenage Heaven" (Eddie Cochran); and "Teen Angel" (Mark Dinning).

In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," Joyce Carol Oates constantly refers to the rhythmic music in the background of the central character Connie's life. During the 1950s and '60s, radio stations that played rock music exclusively popped up all across the country, and gained a listening audience made up almost exclusively of teenagers. In the short story, rock music serves as a constant element in Connie's environment, whether at home or at the drive-in:

> They sat at the counter and crossed their legs at the ankles, their thin shoulders rigid with excitement, and listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the

> background, like music at a church service; it was something to depend upon.
>
> (Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" p. 28)

Connie takes the music very seriously in the story. Popular lyrics inspire her fantasies about what life and love relationships should be like. In real life, the performers of rock music set trends in hair style and dress. These trends physically earmarked the youth of the day, who strove to mimic what they saw. In the short story, Arnold Friend, a man of around thirty, tries to capture this image by dressing in blue jeans and a T-shirt, and by combing his hair back in a style known as a "duck tail" in order to appeal to teenagers like Connie. His look parallels that of music idol Elvis Presley or film star James Dean. Besides his appearance, when Friend pulls up to Connie's house he is tuned in to the same station on his transistor radio that she listens to in her house. Although he is older than her, in these ways he resembles her peers.

DRIVE-IN RESTAURANTS

Although drive-in restaurants did not originate in the 1950s, their popularity boomed with the increase of car production and ownership at this time. Customers in automobiles could pull up to the outer perimeter of the restaurant, park, and order their food. Some drive-in restaurants had waitresses take orders from every car, and some had speaker boxes like the "drive-thru" fast food restaurants of later decades. Drive-ins became popular hangouts for teenagers in the 1950s and '60s. Some restaurants would pump rock music from an inside jukebox out into the parking lot to attract teenage customers. Many of the restaurants appealed to their younger customers with neon signs, gimmicky architecture, and menus that featured hamburgers, french fries, and ice cream sodas.

American teenage culture. During the late 1950s a thriving subculture was emerging for teenagers within American society, setting this age group apart more distinctively than in any previous generation. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" offers up details of this era and the habits of teenagers by describing not only the prevalent music of the day, but also the shopping plazas, drive-in restaurants, and cars that appealed to them in the late 1950s.

Society increasingly catered to the amusements of teenagers as they became a viable target group for commercial and retail purposes. A 1959 *Life* magazine article entitled "The U.S. Teen-Age Consumer" reported that teens spent $10 billion annually on products specifically geared toward their subculture such as records, clothing, and transistor radios. Car sales were also on the rise in the 1950s and '60s; for a teenager, having a flashy automobile was a symbol of status and sex appeal. In the story, Arnold Friend pulls up to Connie's house in a bright gold jalopy convertible, part of his youthful façade that he uses to lure Connie toward him.

A changing subculture. Oates's description of suburban teenagers in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" reflects, to a certain degree, the kind of innocence portrayed in movies and television shows during the 1950s. Yet the fact that the story ends on such a violent note has been attributed to the changing times, both for the teenage subculture and society at large. Elaine Showalter, editor of a book on "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," places the story in this context:

> Connie's fantasy world is the world of James Dean, Natalie Wood and *Rebel without a Cause*. Her coming-of-age story also anticipates the coming-of-age of American society, its emergence from the hazy dreams and social innocence of the 1950s into the harsher realities of random violence, war, and crime.
>
> (Showalter, p. 7)

Rebel without a Cause was a riveting 1955 film that starred James Dean as a teenager from a prosperous household who receives only superficial love from his parents. His social rival is a leather-jacketed hot-rodder, who challenges him to race their jalopies to the edge of a cliff and dive out before the cars drop over it. Natalie Wood played the role of the hot-rodder's girlfriend. The film reaches a violent climax, ending tragically for Dean's character as well as some others. The film reflected the restlessness of the 1950s generation of teenagers, a disquiet which appeared to escalate as the decade wore on.

The late 1950s saw the dawn of an emerging cultural revolution. As the next decade drew near, issues such as civil rights, war, women's rights, and the sexual revolution would deeply affect many American teenagers. The conservative family values and morals that predominated in the 1950s were just beginning to be challenged as the decade came to a close. This transformation in the teen subculture is represented in

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" through the story's description of Connie as being two different people rolled into one:

> She wore a pullover jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk, which could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head; her mouth, which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out. . . .
>
> ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" p. 27)

The changing image of the modern female. In the 1950s it was still considered morally reprehensible for a young woman to exhibit her sexuality by dressing in even a remotely provocative way or flirting with boys in a public place. Yet at the same time societal interest in blatant sexual imagery was blossoming. *Playboy* magazine, known for its titillating photographs of scantily clad or nude women, first appeared in 1953. The 1950s also introduced actresses such as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, whose film personas promoted the female as sex object. There was, in fact, a mixed message about the ideal woman during this time period. Catering to prevalent male fantasies was the alluring image of a voluptuous, sexually promiscuous woman—as hinted at by Marilyn Monroe's on-screen presence. Yet by and large society still encouraged women to marry young, stay at home, and tend to house and family, as Connie's mother does in the story.

The Short Story in Focus

The plot. Connie is a pretty fifteen-year-old girl who lives in a small suburban town with her parents and her older unmarried sister. Neglected by her father and criticized by her mother, Connie takes solace in the knowledge that she is attractive and desirable to the boys she associates with at school and in town. During summer vacation, Connie and her girlfriends go into town a few times a week to shop or see a movie. They occasionally cross the highway and wander into the drive-in restaurant, which is packed with other teenagers, many of whom have their own cars. Connie and her friends typically go off with boys to sit in the cars, eat hamburgers, listen to music on the radio, and kiss. Later, a parent picks the girls up and gets them home before eleven o'clock. There Connie proceeds to dream and fantasize about her romantic adventures, which interest her far more than her family obligations.

One morning, after a night on the town, Connie refuses to go with her parents and sister to a family barbecue, opting instead to stay home alone and listen to music on the radio. Her mother, though irritated, allows her to stay home. Shortly after her family leaves, a car pulls up with two young men in it. Connie vaguely recognizes the car from the drive-in the night before; a man with shaggy black hair behind the driver's wheel had smiled at her.

The man identified himself as Arnold Friend and said he had come to take Connie for a ride. Though dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt, he is an older man. Another man stands quietly near the car with a transistor radio tuned in to the same station as Connie's radio. Connie at first behaves in a mildly flirtatious manner, but as Arnold Friend keeps insisting that she come out of the house and join him for a ride in his car, she grows increasingly disturbed. He refuses to leave and tells her that he knows she is alone and even knows exactly where her family is. Friend seems to have a great deal of information about Connie, which leaves her feeling stricken with fear. His language in regard to her is suggestive

and explicit. He keeps insisting that she come out of the house, threatening to hurt Connie's family if she doesn't cooperate or if she phones for help.

When Connie asks Arnold Friend what he is going to do with her he replies, "Just two things, maybe three. But I promise it won't last long and you'll like me the way you get to like people you're close to.... We'll go out to a nice field.... I'll have my arms tight around you so you won't need to try to get away and I'll show you what love is like, what it does ... what else is there for a pretty girl like you to do but to be sweet and pretty and give in?" ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" pp. 45-6) In sheer horror, Connie feels she has no choice but to surrender to Arnold Friend and thinks that from this moment her world will be forever changed. Though the story ends at this inconclusive moment the clear implication is that she will be raped.

The generation gap. So profound were the differences between the generation of youth in the 1950s and 1960s and that of their parents that their differing perspectives were sometimes referred to as "the generation gap." Some of the films produced during this period mirrored the differences developing between teenagers of this generation and their parents. Their plots contrasted the progressive ideas of teenagers with the conservative values of their parents. Besides *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), other films, such as *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *The Wild One* (1954), dealt with this general theme. The teenagers depicted in these films were a restless lot, caught between the conservative values of their parents' generation and their own desire for independence. Joyce Carol Oates gives a glimpse of this generation gap in the relationship between Connie and her mother:

> Sometimes over coffee, they were almost friends, but something would come up—some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads—and their faces went hard with contempt.
>
> ("Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" p. 30)

Oates offers yet another contrast in generations by juxtaposing Connie and her older sister June. June is twenty-four years old, still lives at home, keeps a tidy appearance and works as a secretary at Connie's high school. Nine years older than Connie, June leads a conservative life and fits more into the stereotype of women in their mother's generation. She is regarded by their mother as an exemplary young woman. Connie, on the other hand, exasperates and irritates her mother. More adventurous and open to romantic and sexual experiences than her sister, Connie rebelliously sneaks in moments with boys at the drive-in, letting her parents think she is at the movies with her girlfriends.

Sources. Joyce Carol Oates based "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" on a true story of rape and murder in Tucson, Arizona, in 1965. Charles Schmid, a twenty-three-year-old man, was arrested for the rapes and murders of several teenage girls. Schmid's profile was similar to Arnold Friend's; an older man, he purposely dressed in jeans and T-shirts and drove a flashy jalopy. *Life* referred to him as the "Pied Piper of Tucson." Oates says she was fascinated by the story but did not read the entire article as she didn't want the real details and facts to influence her own fictional version. There were, of course, other influences:

> Oates ... has explained that the story came to her "more or less in piece" after hearing Bob Dylan's song, "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and then reading about a killer in the Southwest and thinking about "the old legends and folk songs of Death and the Maiden."
>
> (Showalter, p. 9)

Events in History at the Time the Short Story Was Written

Women's lib. During the 1960s, women began to challenge cultural, societal, and legal restrictions that had been imposed upon them for generations. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" was originally published in 1966, the same year that the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded. Three years earlier one of its founders, Betty Friedan, had published *The Feminine Mystique,* the result of interviews that revealed the sense of personal emptiness many women felt in their "ideal" roles as wife and mother. Since its inception, NOW has worked to help fill this void by promoting occupational opportunities for women and has also supported legislative proposals that would guarantee women's equality with men.

Feminist issues surface in much of Joyce Carol Oates's writing, and "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is no exception. In the story, Connie struggles with her identity as a maturing young woman both at home and in society. At home she pretends to adopt the values of her parents, which dictate that respectable young

women marry young and raise a family, as her mother did. Connie's twenty-four-year-old sister, who still lives at home, is looked upon as responsible but also as a spinster. Well aware of her attractiveness, Connie blatantly flirts with several boys when she is free from the confines of her home. This flirting leads to her being singled out as a potential assault victim of a sexually disturbed male. The story exploits the attitudes about girls such as Connie by providing insight into Connie's world, and showing that, self-absorbed as she was, her fate was a result not of her own intentions but of how she was perceived by a predominantly male-oriented society. Connie comes across as a teenager trying to define herself in the context of her times, as other teenagers were in the 1950s and even more conspicuously in the 1960s, when the story was written.

Acquaintance rape. Rape was one of the most serious of feminist issues emerging in American society during the 1960s. Although the term "acquaintance rape" had not yet been coined in 1965 when Joyce Carol Oates wrote "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," the story portrays this type of offense.

A decade later, studies would show that 15 percent of all rapes were committed by men who were either related to the victim or acquainted with her by way of a social situation or mutual environment in which both victim and rapist found themselves. In the fictional case of Connie and Arnold Friend, he singles her out at a drive-in the night before. He discovers her name, where she lives, and even the whereabouts of her family—when they leave and when they are expected back home. What makes "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" so chilling is Friend's use of seductive and threatening language to coerce Connie into submitting to his will at the sacrifice of her virtue and perhaps even her life. Initially she is psychologically raped by Friend, and her ultimate acceptance of the situation reflects reality. As investigations of rapes have revealed, a typical reaction of the female victim has been to eventually surrender to the man's interpretation of the situation and submit to being raped.

Part of this definition is the man's view of the woman. In the story Connie is viewed by Arnold Friend as a sexually brazen adolescent who is asking for her fate by virtue of her public behavior. It is this perception that inspires him to choose her as a victim at the drive-in the night before. By the 1960s, when the story was published, such perceptions were being challenged by the women's movement. Women began standing up for their right to behave as sexual entities without being labeled "loose" or "a tramp" or being viewed as sexual objects.

Reviews. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" first appeared in the literary magazine *Epoch* in 1966. Since then it has been reprinted in textbooks and short story anthologies. It was selected for *The Best American Short Stories* in 1967, and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards 1968.* Reviewers have described it as a short story "that must rate along with the masterpieces of the genre" (Waller in Gunton, p. 351). Many further regard the story as not only a tale of seduction but also a reflection of the times as experienced by adolescents such as fifteen-year-old Connie: "Oates captures so well the vacuousness, cheapness, and narcissism of life for Connie and her friends who have nothing better to do than stroll up and down a shopping center plaza looking for excitement" (Creighton in Gunton, p. 249). Other reviews of the story have noted its skillful portrayal of not only action but also attitudes toward women. In 1986 a film entitled *Smooth Talk* was released, based on Oates's short story; the screenplay was written by the author herself. The plot was considered as relevant to American society in 1986 as it had been in 1966.

For More Information

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