

**The Horror of Connie's Story and Ours:  
A Feminist Analysis of Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"**

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The very perplexing short story entitled "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates has been interpreted, not surprisingly, in a variety of ways. Joyce M. Wegs finds a surface realism in which Arnold Friend is read as a "symbolic Satan" (70) whose access to fifteen-year-old Connie is a direct result of the moral indifference of the adults in the story (67). She also asserts that he "functions on a psychological level" wherein he "is the incarnation of Connie's unconscious erotic desires and dreams, but in uncontrollable nightmare form" (70). Marie M. O. Urbanski, in turn, sees the story as an existential allegory of initiation which represents a "young person coming to grips with externally determined fate" (200). Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood want to read the story psychologically, as presenting "aspects of the transpersonal psyche projected outward, products of the unconscious mental processes of a troubled adolescent girl" (156). They find that Connie is on an inward quest for personal identity but comes to disaster because she has been deprived of "maps of the unconscious such as fairy tales provide." Schulz and Rockwood offer an ingenious reading, but it hangs upon their assumption that "Connie represents an entire generation of young people" who were never exposed to these helpful fairy tales (157).<sup>1</sup> Another critic, A. R. Coulthard, picking up on Tom Quirk's identification of an actual murder case as a source for Oates's story, reads the story as simple realism. G. J. Weinberger would have us see Arnold Friend as Connie's double, her "*alter ego*" who represents her fear of the passage from adolescence to adulthood (205). While all of these interpretations have their points which recommend them, what is missing is a distinctly feminist reading of this story. The closest thing to it is one sentence by Greg Johnson: "As a feminist allegory, then, 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' is a cautionary tale, suggesting that young women are 'going' exactly where their mothers and grandmothers have already 'been': into sexual bondage at the hands of a male 'Friend'" (103). While this is an apt analysis of the story, I believe that much more can be said. Thus, I will call upon the works of Luce

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<sup>1</sup> Schulz and Rockwood's assumption is seen to be patently false when we realize that the society depicted in this story is that of the mid-1960s and that Connie, then, must have been a young child in the 1950s. Being of that generation myself, I know that we were exposed to the fairy tales Schulz and Rockwood discuss. As a matter of fact, two of the songs the fifteen-year-old Connie would have been hearing on her radio are "Pied Piper" by The Changin' Times and "Little Red Riding Hood" by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs. The allusions of both songs were readily understood by teenagers at the time.

Irigaray, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Hélène Cixous, and others to produce a detailed feminist reading of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Oates herself has described the mode in which this story is written as “psychological realism” (Preface 10). The question arises then, whose psychological theory will offer us a meaningful reading of the story? I believe the work of Luce Irigaray is most illuminating. According to Irigaray, “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (“Sex” 350). This is exactly the situation we find Connie in—“she knew she was pretty and that was everything” (34). Why is that everything? Because prettiness is what men want, what they value. Everything in Connie’s little world of pop music, movies, shopping centers, drive-in restaurants, and cars parked in alleys tells her this. It also could not be lost on Connie that her “plain and chunky” sister June is twenty-four and still living at home, unmarried (35). Nonetheless, Connie has misread the masculine concept of sexuality; she idealizes it as “sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs” (39). Irigaray points out the true state of affairs when she tells us that in Western phallogentric sexuality male desire is all that counts:

Woman . . . is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will “take” her as his “object” when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (“Sex” 351)

Let us look, then, at the ways Irigaray’s observation is played out in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Arnold Friend has been described as Satanic by Wegs and as Satyric by Joan Easterly. Oates herself says that “he is Death, he is the ‘elf-Knight’ of the ballads, he is the Imagination, he is a Dream, he is a Lover, a Demon, *and all that*” (Knott 19). I find him to be the personification of phallogentric sexuality and, thus, of patriarchal culture. My interpretation here has much to do with what Irigaray writes about the masculine “gaze.” The concept is derived from her critique of Freud. Irigaray finds that Freud’s definition of women is based on sight, specifically, what Freud sees when he looks at male and female genitals. For Freud, then, woman is *nothing to see* (“Castration” 405). Irigaray finds that this “gaze” is a phallogentric negativity which has nothing to do with the reality of women. She contends that “the predominance of the visual is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking” (“Sex” 351). Interestingly, though I make no assertion of authorial intent,

Oates's story subtly reflects this distinction. That is, when we first meet Arnold Friend, he is described as staring at and watching Connie. This gaze of his is then clearly associated with his sexuality when he says, "Gonna get you, baby" to Connie (37). In turn, Connie's nonvisual, tactile sexuality is shown to us when she is sitting in the sun in her backyard "with her eyes closed." She is daydreaming and feeling the warmth as if it were "the caresses of love"(39).

For this interpretation, another crucial aspect of Irigaray's theory, as articulated by Toril Moi, is as follows:

The woman, for Freud as for other Western philosophers, becomes a mirror for his own masculinity. Irigaray concludes that in our society representation, and therefore also social and cultural structures, are products of what she sees as a fundamental *hom(m)osexualité*. The pun in French is on *homo* ('same') and *homme* ('man'): the male desire for the same. (135)

The idea is that man does not—indeed, can never—see woman. His gaze goes through her to see only a reflection of himself. Again, subtly, we see this happen in Oates's story. Arnold Friend arrives at Connie's home wearing metallic-mirrored sunglasses. What he is seeing, then, is seen through a mirror, and what he is seeing is certainly not Connie. We know this because the story closes with him saying, "My sweet little blue-eyed girl," when in fact Connie's eyes are brown (54). To him she is only an object, the object of his desire. Related to this is Connie's valuation of herself in respect to such male desire. When we are introduced to her it is as one who constantly checks mirrors and other people's faces for affirmation of her prettiness, which is her standard of self-worth (34). Later we see her reflected in Arnold Friend's mirrored glasses (41), and we must recall our introduction to her. Her complicity with the masculine gaze is now prepared to advance to its inevitable conclusion—the total destruction of any subjective existence. She has become merely the objectification of Arnold Friend's desire.

According to Irigaray, "woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity" ("Sex" 355). We can also see this demonstrated in Oates's story. The first man to consider is Connie's father. All we know of him is that he is seldom home, and he does not bother to talk much to the women when he is there (35). Connie does not warrant his notice because she has no use-value for him, in part due to the incest taboo and in part due to her not being old enough yet to exchange with another man as kinship property. Thus, Connie is free to be taken by any man who has a use for her. Arnold Friend is such a man; she is useful to him as a sexual object, an apparently disposable one at that. This can be seen as purely an exchange between men, albeit an appropriation, that substitutes a "lover" who pays attention to her for a father who does not, and the women in the story have no say about

it. In fact, Connie is totally silenced in this story. From the moment she picks up the telephone and can only scream into it, she has nothing more to say. Hélène Cixous makes a statement which can perhaps shed some light on this silencing of Connie. She writes, “Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn’t thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble” (335). Thus, the woman who allows herself to be silenced by a phallogocentric culture does not resist death. This is Connie; she has accepted the self-image dictated by men, and now she has no resources available which would enable her to resist the death that awaits her. She finally goes quietly.<sup>2</sup>

Most commentators on “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” agree that when Connie walks out the door into the arms of Arnold Friend she is going to her death—whether it be physical or psychic, and I would say both. Irigaray can help us again to understand Connie’s murderer. She says the following about Western phallogocentric sexuality:

one finds imperatives dictated by the enactment of sadomasochistic fantasies, these in turn governed by man’s relation to his mother: the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived, the secret of his begetting, of his “origin.” Desire/need, also to make blood flow again in order to revive a very old relationship—intrauterine, to be sure, but also prehistoric—to the maternal. (“Sex” 351)

Do we know anything about Arnold Friend’s relation to his mother? I think that one seemingly obscure passage in Oates’s story can offer us a clue. Shortly after making his first threat to harm Connie’s family, Arnold Friend says something that seems totally unrelated to anything that has gone before:

“Hey, you know that old woman down the road, the one with the chickens and stuff—you know her?”

“She’s dead!”

“Dead? What? You know her?” Arnold Friend said.

“She’s dead—”

“Don’t you like her?”

“She’s dead—she’s—she isn’t here any more—”

“But don’t you like her, I mean, you got something against her? Some grudge or

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Connie “asked for it.” To ask would be to speak. Connie is the silent victim of patriarchal acculturation.

something?” Then his voice dipped as if he were conscious of a rudeness. (51)

Could this old woman be Arnold Friend’s mother? He had been talking about Connie’s parents, perhaps that called to mind his own. His rude questions at the end of this passage indicate that he had some personal feeling for the woman. Connie’s family had only been living in their home there for three years and may not have known that the old woman had a son because Arnold Friend, as an older man, probably would not have been living with his mother. But, perhaps they were close. She could have been the source of his information about Connie and her friends. If we posit that Arnold Friend and his mother were very close and that she is dead, then Irigaray’s comments above help explain his actions toward Connie. As long as his mother was alive, he may have been able to resist the desire to force penetration to “make blood flow again.” But with her gone, he must find a new object for these desires, that is, Connie, whom he “appropriate[s] for himself.”

Another feminist approach to “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is provided by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and their concept of the anxiety of authorship. In their own work, they use their theory to analyze eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers. I submit that it can be applied as well to Oates since the influences she acknowledges are all male. Joanne V. Creighton tells us that at Syracuse University Oates “read William Faulkner, a significant influence on her writing, who she claimed ‘bowled’ her over. ‘Then Kafka. . . . Later, Freud, Nietzsche, Mann—they’re almost real personalities in my life. And Dostoevsky and Melville’” (17).<sup>3</sup> Thus, with no female precursors, she is subject to the anxiety Gilbert and Gubar have identified in women’s texts. The key point here is that anxiety of authorship manifests itself in a hidden text. This hidden story in a woman’s work represents “woman’s quest for self-definition” (Gilbert 76). In order to find what is hidden in Oates’s text, we must have recourse to Irigaray’s methods of “masquerade” and “mimicry,” as explained by Elaine Millard:

By mimicry, I mean Irigaray’s method of reproducing the discourse of others, in such a way as to undermine the authority of the original. She sees it as an interim strategy for dealing with patriarchal discourses in which the woman deliberately reveals the mechanisms by which these exploit her. Similarly, a masquerade is a deliberate assumption of the roles assigned to woman in the name of femininity. By adopting a masquerade a woman is able to experience herself as she is positioned by the desire of the masculine. (170)

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<sup>3</sup> Creighton is quoting from Adams, R. M. “Joyce Carol Oates at Home.” *New York Times Book Review* 28 Sept. 1969: 48.

In “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Oates’s “masquerade” is clear, though it would be hidden to those who accept the roles assigned to women. Connie’s role is that of the “pretty girl,” her sister June’s role is as a secretary—an appropriate “woman’s” job, and her mother is a housewife. How these women are “positioned by the desire of the masculine” is brought out most clearly by reflection on Connie’s fate and also, more subtly, by the vacuity of the lives of the other two women. Oates and her female readers, then, may vicariously experience their own positioning by men and, hopefully, readjust their self-definitions accordingly.

I would argue next that the “mimicry” in Oates’s text is very well-hidden and is signaled by her dedication of the story as being “For Bob Dylan.” She identifies Dylan’s song, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” as an inspiration for the story (Knott 18). I find, though, that there are echoes of other Dylan songs in the story which are subversive of patriarchal discourse in their mimicry and which reveal phallogocentric exploitation. The first song to examine is “Like a Rolling Stone.” This song is addressed to a woman who has come down in the world, and its tone is one of triumphant mockery; she has been too proud, and now she has received the humbling she deserves. The main lines that are echoed in the story are as follows:

Go to him now, he calls you, you can’t refuse

When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose

You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal. (from *Highway 61 Revisited*)

When read in the context of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” the lines reveal the full potential for cruelty which is inherent in patriarchal culture. The powerlessness of the woman is clear; she is at the mercy of a man (men), she cannot refuse, and she is rendered invisible—a non-entity. The logical conclusion which such phallogocentric thinking leads to is horrifying. If Connie is this woman, she has nothing to lose; her life is worthless, so she might as well go with Arnold Friend and die.

Dylan’s “Tombstone Blues” is another song echoed in Oates’s story. The key part of this one is the following refrain:

Mama’s in the fac’try

She ain’t got no shoes

Daddy’s in the alley

He’s lookin’ for food

I’m in the kitchen

With the tombstone blues (from *Highway 61 Revisited*)

This is one of Dylan’s whimsical dream montages. There is no discernible logic or point to it. Yet, look at the way it has percolated through Oates’s unconscious. The notable things about the mother and father in

the refrain is that they are both absent, and they are both suffering a lack. Connie's parents in the story are similarly absent for her, and they lack any real interest in who she is or what she does. And where does Connie find herself? Why, in the kitchen, of course, and with death at the door, she truly has the tombstone blues. What is ironically subversive is that the singer of this song is a man, ostensibly the "I" in the kitchen, but the kitchen, and its implied entrapment, is truly only a feminine image for death. There is nothing whimsical about what the kitchen represents for many women.

One final song to look at is "Just Like a Woman." Again, the crucial lines are found in the refrain:

She takes just like a woman, yes, she does

She makes love just like a woman, yes, she does

And she aches just like a woman

But she breaks just like a little girl. (from *Blonde On Blonde*)

Clearly, Arnold Friend's desire has positioned Connie as a woman to whom he intends to make love. But, when the story calls this song to mind, it is as the utter negation of the stereotypes of the song. Connie is in no position to "take" anything, and I am sure that, in any case, feminists would find that the depiction of women as takers is offensive and false. Connie is a woman but, at age fifteen, only barely so; she is still really a girl, and the breakage in store for her is vicious and fatal. Finally, there is no love-making in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" What there is is rape, the complete opposite of love. Thus, we see that Oates, consciously or not, subverts Bob Dylan's patriarchal discourse through mimicry and, in the process, reveals the exploitation of women that is inherent in such discourse.

Finally, by writing "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Joyce Carol Oates has done women a favor. It is a horrifying vision, but the thoughtful reader will see the causes which underlie the horror. If the shocking realization of the damage, to everyone, that results from a phallogentric culture spurs the readers to change themselves, to become less complicitous with patriarchy, then Oates's horrific story will serve a useful purpose as an instrument of feminist consciousness-raising.

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