An Exploration of Tension in Joyce Carol Oates’
“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

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I wish I had been able to read this story blindly: the name of the author removed, the text freed from its position in the anthology. Its anonymity would have allowed for a reading without association or subconscious development of a thesis to “justify” the work. I would have been able to read the story for its emotional intensity, which I think is responsible for its greatness. But when I first read the words, “Her name was Connie,” as an undergraduate student, I knew they belonged to Joyce Carol Oates, a powerhouse in contemporary American fiction. I also knew, thanks to our professor’s ill-advised decision to provide the “background” for the story— the murder of three young women by a serial killer nicknamed the Pied Piper— that it was, as they say, “based on true events.” Sadly, my reading was woefully closed. I looked for similarities between the actual killings and Oates’ narrative, and considered what the ending tells the readers about Connie’s fate. Yet despite the rather pedantic approach to the text, I never did forget the story. Unlike the hundreds of stories that I have read, put away, and forgotten, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” remained with me. Now, eight years after my first reading, I came back to the story in an attempt to discover why it made such a strong impression on me. My goal was to approach the story with the openness of a critical reader. In doing so, I discovered that Oates crafted a story that develops both a tension between characters and a tension between reader and text.

The opening paragraph of Joyce Carol Oates’ story introduces the tension that builds throughout the narrative. For Connie, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, there is a crisis of identity. She defines herself by how she looks, not uncommon for a young teenager. But she measures her appearance in two ways: how she views herself—she “glance[s] into mirrors” (450)—and by how others view her—she checks “other people’s faces to make sure her own was all right” (450). Yet
we question why she needs affirmation of her beauty if, as we are told, she knows that she is “pretty and that was everything” (450). The answer lies in her awareness of her youth and subsequently that beauty is transient. She recognizes her connection with her mother, acknowledging that her mother “had been pretty once too” (450). Therefore, she knows that her own beauty will be lost, and therefore she will lose “everything.” In looking in mirrors she instead verifies that her beauty has not yet faded. She voices her fear of lost beauty in describing her older sister June as “so plain and chunky and steady” (450).

This confusion of her identity extends beyond her appearance though. Significant too is her age of fifteen. American culture has popularized a girl’s “sweet sixteenth” birthday party as a sort of initiation into adulthood, thus the months between the fifteenth and sixteenth year mark a transition period, an undefined stage between girlhood and womanhood. While an exciting moment in a girl’s life, she can also experience an uneasiness over the event; there is a sense of loss that is accompanied by a feeling of anxiety about what she is becoming. Connie feels this tension. She is at once both a girl and a young woman; she giggles with her friends, but she desires the attention of boys. The tension is so great at the conclusion of the story because we see a child forced into adulthood. With Arnold Friend standing outside, Connie sits on the floor, hunched against the wall with her leg crossed underneath her. She sits in this fetal position, all wet, crying out for her mother. The image is subtly suggestive of a child after birth. Yet she is forced to rise, walk forward, and enter into the arms of a man who will “show [her] what love is like, what it does” (464).

Another detail that should not be overlooked is that the very title of the story perfectly exemplifies the tension that Oates creates within the narrative. Introducing us to the story are two questions simultaneously presented, one looking forward and the other looking backward, like the two faces of Janus. A third unasked question—“where are you now?”—is precisely the question that Connie struggles to answer about herself. She often cannot handle the present and she escapes
through daydreams of days past spent with boys, and looks forward in time only to find the image of her mother.

Best exemplifying the tension that Oates subtly introduces in the opening paragraph is the description of Connie in the fifth paragraph. The narrator states that “everything about her had two sides” (451). She wears the charm bracelets of a young girl, but tucks her jersey blouse tightly at her waist to accentuate her feminine figure. Her walk can be both “childlike and bobbing” and “languid” (451). But we also witness Connie’s struggle for an identity apart from the group of girls who dress alike, walk in the same manner, and “lean together.” In fact, when the girls reach the drive-in restaurant, she quickly leaves her friends to spend time with Eddie. Stylistically, Oates also shifts the focus from the group to Connie. The passage begins with a succession of plural pronouns that emphasize the collective group, before the pattern is broken and attention turns to Connie with all singular pronouns.

The duality that readers identify in Connie’s character exists also in the description of the drive-in restaurant. The atmosphere of the scene is a mix of the religious and the sexual. The bottle-shaped restaurant, certainly phallic, is described as a “sacred building” offering sanctuary and “blessing.” Topping the structure is its deity, a “revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft” (451). The girls sit with legs crossed [my italics], and listen to the music which is “like music at a church service.” The language is suggestive, with phrases like “it made them feel good,” “their faces pleased and expectant,” “give them what they yearned for,” “rigid with excitement,” and “made everything so good” (452). The scene helps to intensify the warring forces that are at work in the text.

Also offered in the scene at the restaurant are subtle elements of the fantastic that we find in fairytales. This realization upsets the reader who believes this story based on reality. As in many fairytales, there is a transgression of a place that is off limits—the girls are supposed to be at the movies, yet they run to the drive-in that is for the “older kids.” “The maze of parked cars”
that the girls must work their way through is like the woods often found in fairy tales. With the word “midsummer,” Oates may even allude to Shakespeare’s comedy about the mischievous (and sexual) play of young couples in the woods. The introduction of the elements of the fairytale draws readers back to the story’s opening line. Its succinctness strikes us as strange. Oates easily could have opened with the third line: “[Connie] had a quick, nervous giggling habit…” Yet she begins, “Her name was Connie.” After my first reading of the story, I believed that past tense simply hints at Connie’s tragic fate since the story leaves us without definitive answers. However, now having recognized the elements of a fairytale, the beginning reads similarly to the opening of a fairytale and could just as well read, “Once upon a time, there was a girl named Connie.”

Other characteristics common to fairy tales begin to emerge as we read. Introduced early in the story is Connie’s father who “was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed. He didn’t bother talking much to them” (450-451). He is an absent father, like the fathers found in many fairytales—“Snow White,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Cinderella,” and “Little Red Riding Hood” all come to mind. The father of Connie’s friend is not any better—when he picks the girls up from the movies, he “never bothered to ask what they had done” (452). Before the arrival of Arnold Friend, what we essentially have is a collection of women: Connie, her mother and her sister, and her friends. But Connie’s father is not only absent, he is silent. For a story that puts a premium on the sounds of various voices, that we do not hear from him (pardon the pun) speaks volumes. Only Connie’s mother is supplied dialogue. In fact, the one description of Connie’s father is telling: “Connie sat out back in a lawn chair and watched them drive away, her father quiet and bald, hunched around so that he could back the car out, her mother with a look that was still angry and not at all softened through the windshield…” (453). The descriptor “quiet” is an odd choice, especially since the description is mostly a visual one, none of the others in the car are speaking
either, and Connie would not be able to hear him anyway. But the word is used, underscoring his lack of a voice in a larger sense. Also telling is that we only see the back of his bald head; his face—his identity—is hidden from view.

For me, the recognition of the elements of fantasy added significantly more tension to the story. As a reader familiar with Joyce Carol Oates, I have certain expectations of her work. Though the volume and range of Oates' work is certainly vast, I expect from Oates stark realism. She sites William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Eugene O’Neill as her literary influences, all of whom can safely be categorized as anti-romantic. Having read her short novel Black Water, a fictionalized account of Senator Ted Kennedy’s Chappaquiddick accident, and several of her short stories, I am aware that Oates bases much of her fiction on actual events. A recent story published in The New Yorker entitled “Landfill” is no exception. In fact, the story is so seeped in reality that it drew the ire of at least one reader, who writes a letter: “Joyce Carol Oates hews so closely to real-life events in her most recent story that for her to categorize it as fiction seems inaccurate. ‘Landfill’ uses nearly the exact dates, times, descriptions, and scenarios from the traumatic story of John Fiocco, Jr…” She closes the letter, “Oates could just as easily have created a fictional piece of her own, rather than incorporating such significant details wholesale from a well-known, real-life tragedy” (“The Mail”). The reader misses the point that I too missed but now see. Oates has created a fictional piece of her own, and it is because it is fiction (instead of an article in a newspaper) that it elicits such an emotional response. Clearly for this reader, the awareness that the fictional story was based on real events created an uncomfortable, tense feeling. This is the same tension that works so well in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”. Regardless whether or not we know the “real” story behind Oates’ narrative, we can see the real in it. We know these characters, and their actions, though mysterious, can be rationally explained. Yet in recognizing the fantastic, we are forced to deliberate as we read, pulled one way or another as we

progress through the story. The act of negotiation creates for the readers a tension similar to that felt by Connie.

The deliberation intensifies with the introduction of Arnold Friend. As Connie walks through the parking lot with Eddie, she glances over and sees the mysterious face looking back at her. Reading how Friend’s “lips widened into a grin” we are supposed to recall the “revolving figure of a grinning boy” on top of the restaurant. That Friend bears a striking resemblance to the mascot—the restaurant’s “deity”—hints that there may be something supernatural about Friend. The detail is intensified with the first description of Friend after he arrives at Connie’s house: “he had shaggy, shabby black hair that looked crazy as a wig and he was grinning at her” (454). Also strange is that Eddie, who walks next to Connie, does not notice Friend when he speaks to her, even though they are “just a few feet” apart. While this could be easily explained—Eddie is excited about the prospect of spending time with Connie and is single-minded—it nevertheless raises doubt in readers; Is Arnold really there? Could he be some sort of an apparition?

Just as readers begin to have questions about Friend, we begin to have doubts about Connie too. Following the introduction to Friend, there is a shift in the telling of the story. Time is accelerated—“she spent three hours with him”—leaving out many details. More significant is that we are excluded from seeing Connie during the time she spends with Eddie “down an alley a mile or so away.” Since Connie is the focalizer of the story, readers are uncomfortable with the sudden lack of information about her. Not knowing what she does in the alley, how should we judge her later in the story? How innocent is she? In fact, it is difficult to develop a clear picture of Connie for the rest of the story. There continues to be a confusion of time and space, forcing us to deliberate as to the reality of the scenes. Many of them have a dream-like atmosphere. For example:

Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped
over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs; and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was, the back yard ran off into weeds and a fence-like line of trees and behind it the sky was perfectly blue and still. The asbestos ranch house that was now three years old startled her—it looked small.

She shook her head as if to get awake. (453-454)

While it is clear that Connie is experience a daydream, the strangeness of reality that she notices when she awakens is peculiar. The scene is almost defamiliarized when the sky is described as “perfectly blue and still.” Furthermore, the qualifying statement “as if” leaves doubts as to whether she has even woken up. A character and a story that seemed so certain in the beginning now leave readers full of questions.

Other details present in the above passage that readers notice throughout the story are the many allusions to music and song. Of course the most obvious is the Oates’ dedication of the story to Bob Dylan. This alone creates conflict because the music that Connie listens to is not the music of Dylan. She listens to “hard, fast, shrieking songs,” probably those of Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis. But throughout the references are plenty—fourteen uses of the word “music,” and six uses of “song.” At first, we do not know what to make of the references; we are only aware of their presence. We do notice however that these words are concentrated in certain scenes. For example, the “music” is used three times in a single sentence to describe the drive-in restaurant: “[they] listened to the music that made everything so good”: the music was always in the background, like music at a church service” (452). Oates is anything but subtle here. We are supposed to hear the soundtrack that accompanies the scene. And as they drive away from the restaurant, we are told that Connie “couldn’t hear the music at this distance” (452).
The second scene that references music has Connie daydreaming about times she has spent with boys. The vision is described: “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 and the humid night air of July” (453). At this point, we realize that music accompanies the dream-like scenes of the story, the times at which Connie is most relaxed. The restaurant is described as though it were a magical city glowing in the darkness, its atmosphere almost bringing her to life: “Connie couldn't help but let her eyes wander over the windshields and faces all around her, her face gleaming with a joy that had nothing to do with Eddie or even this place; it might have been the music. She drew her shoulders up and sucked in her breath with the pure pleasure of being alive” (452). A similar experience is described later in the story as Connie listens to the radio: “And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest” (454). The passage reads as pure fantasy, and the music seems to reinforce the unreality of the images.

Just as we recognize the presence of music, we are equally alert to its absence. It accentuates the tension between the fantasy and the very real. However, Oates does not leave the reader with silence—the void is filled with other sounds. The technique is similar to a director of a film shooting a scene without a score, and focusing instead of the “natural” sounds created in the scene. The best example of this technique is the paragraph immediately following the scene quoted above that has Connie listening to music in her room. Oates writes:

After a while she heard a car coming up the drive. She sat up at once, startled, because it couldn't be her father so soon. The gravel kept crunching all the way in from the road—the driveway was long—and Connie ran to the window. It was a car she didn't know. It was an open jalopy, painted a bright gold that caught the sunlight opaquely. Her heart began to pound and her fingers snatched at her hair,
checking it, and she whispered, "Christ. Christ," wondering how bad she looked.

The car came to a stop at the side door and the horn sounded four short taps, as if this were a signal Connie knew. (454)

The ethereal atmosphere fused with music is replaced with the sounds of crunching gravel, whispers, the pounding of her heard, and the honking of a horn. We seem to sense the danger even if we fail at first to recognize the visitor. This feeling of anxiety is linked to Oates’ use of sounds. With the music absent, we connect with the tenseness that Connie feels. When she speaks to Friend, she smirks, fidgets, and is short. Yet as Connie becomes more comfortable with the exchange, the music seems to return: “He [Arnold] lifted his friend’s arm and showed her the little transistor radio the boy was holding, and now Connie began to hear the music” (455). The suggestion is that Connie is slowly drifting back into her fantasized world. Her mannerisms change indicating that she is interested in him—she blushes and asks him a question about his car, inviting him to continue the conversation. She even laughs at the writing on his smashed bumper, “DONE BY A CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER” (455). However, we see Connie negotiating her conflicted feelings about Friend. She acknowledges that he looked “strange,” yet she also “liked the way he was dressed”; his face is comfortingly “familiar,” but she feels like “a treat he was going to gobble up”; he laughs, though it seemed “fake”; his eyes are surrounded by “pale skin” but look “amiable” (456-457). But again it is the music, this time in Friend’s voice, that eases Connie’s concerns. The intensity of the soundtrack increases: “He spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song. His smile assured her that everything was fine. In the car Ellie turned up the volume on his radio and did not bother to look around at them” (457). Like Connie, we try to sort our feelings about Arnold Friend. We acknowledge that he is strange, but is he evil?

As Connie converses with Friend and listens “to the music from her radio and the boy’s blend together” (458), the description of Arnold epitomizes the paradox of the story—he is two
things at once: He stands “stiffly relaxed,” wears a “slippery friendly smile,” and speaks with a voice “slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy.” But Connie recognizes in Arnold what we recognize in the story: “…all these things did not come together” (458). At this realization, Connie no longer hears the music, the tone of the story changes, and it delves into complete fantasy. She suddenly recognizes that Friend, who had looked so much like the other boys she knew, has aged before her eyes, and like when he first arrives and wakes her from her dream, her heart begins to “pound faster.” His appearance now appears demonic: “He grinned to reassure her and lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. His teeth were big and white. He grinned so broadly his eyes became slits and she saw how thick the lashes were, thick and black as if painted with a black tarlike material” (458). His appearance is also eerily similar to that of many evil entities in classic fairytales, most notably the wolves in “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs.”

Arnold Friend’s appearance is not the only aspect that undergoes a change. His voice, which receives much attention for the rest of the story, also mutates:

He had the voice of the man on the radio now. It was the same voice, Connie thought. “Don'tcha know it's Sunday all day? And honey, no matter who you were with last night, today you're with Arnold Friend and don't you forget it! Maybe you better step out here,” he said, and this last was in a different voice. It was a little flatter, as if the heat was finally getting to him. (459)

Because Connie’s father was silent in the beginning of the story, this male voice is more prominent. It is variously described as loud, soft, forced, dipping, and “gentle-loud.” It has significant power over Connie, as she experiences strange, supernatural sensations described as “waves of dizziness.” In fact, his voice must be a source of power, because he repeatedly commands Connie to “listen.” Ironically, not only does he use his voice to manipulate, but he also manipulates Connie’s voice:
Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend was stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house. (463-464)

Arnold Friend seems to have possessed Connie, and he now can control her with simple commands. By simply directing her to “put the phone back… get up… turn this way… [and] come to me,” he draws her out of her house, into his arms, and off to “the vast sunlit reaches of the land” (464-465).

Ultimately, what Joyce Carol Oates has created is a tale that is loaded with tension. On the one hand, the narrative appears quite realistic, only faintly hinting at anything fantastic. Yet the story clearly becomes one that we can define as belonging to the genre of “fantasy literature.” Its characters, who appear to be “regular” people that we know, are in reality complex, layered, and ubiquitous. As the story progresses, the reader continuously compiles details and recognizes subtitles in the text. The powerful story resonates with readers not because it is based on a real-life event, but because it shares with the reader the tension that Connie feels at the conclusion of the story.
Works Cited


Works Consulted