Autumn Barton

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Literary Essay

Joyce Carol Oates’ haunting story ‘*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’ (WAYGWHYB)* has captivated readers and critics alike since its 1966 publication, igniting many interpretations regarding its message and symbolism. At the heart of the narrative is 15-year-old Connie, who’s caught between adolescence and adulthood. She puts considerable effort into her appearance and navigating teenage romance, driven by both a desire for attention and a search for her identity. Her preoccupation and apparent vulnerability appeal to Arnold Friend, a mysteriously unsettling antagonist who appears outside of her home while her family is away. However, what begins as flirtation quickly morphs into harassment. His exterior and desperate attempts to seem relatable reveal that he’s not who he claims to be, and he scares Connie with cryptic threats and extremely specific knowledge about her. The story ends ambiguously, with her stepping out of the safety of her home and into the unknown with Arnold. His character introduction is often interpreted as the moment where reality and a nightmare blur. Some critics argue that Connie spends the latter half of the story in a dreamlike state, hallucinating the danger Arnold brings to her doorstep. Others view him not just as a menacing groomer, but as a literal or symbolic embodiment of the devil, manipulating Connie with an uncanny level of knowledge on her life and habits. These interpretations are supported by what is considered Oates’ use of religious symbolism, eerie characterization, and the story’s surreal tone that suggests something more metaphysical could be at play. By examining *WAYGWHYB* through symbolic, psychological, and feminist lenses, this essay argues that Oates uses ambiguity not to obscure reality, but to emphasize the complex and often contradictory forces that promote young women’s vulnerability to exploitation.

The supernatural elements within *WAYGWHYB* have led many readers to interpret Arnold not as a literal man, but as a symbolic or otherworldly figure. Joyce M. Wegs in her article “‘Don’t You Know Who I Am?’: The Grotesque in Oates’s ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” characterizes Arnold as a demonic, grotesque embodiment of Connie’s shadowed emotions, arguing that “Arnold Friend is the incarnation of Connie’s unconscious erotic desires and dreams, but in uncontrollable nightmare form” (Wegs 70). According to Wegs, Connie’s initial fear and fascination with Arnold are rooted in her suppressed sexual longing that arises from her “trashy daydreams” (Oates), which blur into a nightmare when confronted by the real world. Wegs compellingly outlines Arnold’s strange physical traits in his “shaggy black hair…evidently really a wig,” his makeup caked on “except for his throat,” and the “runty” stature disguised by stuffed boots (Wegs, 68), as evidence of his grotesqueness. However, these details do not necessitate a supernatural reading. Rather, they highlight the desperate strategies a predator will employ to trick their victims, reflecting the very real phenomenon of adult men preying on adolescent girls through performative familiarity with youth culture. Wegs ultimately claims that Arnold possesses “all the traditional sinister traits of that arch-deceiver and source of grotesque terror, the devil” (Wegs, 69), and even believes that Connie, “actually welcomes and invites this demonic visitation.” This idea is troubling, as it complements the notion that Connie is complicit in her own victimization. By contrast, G.J. Weinberger offers a more grounded interpretation of Arnold’s symbolic role. In his article “Who is Arnold Friend? The Other Self in Joyce Carol Oates’ ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’” he presents Arnold as Connie’s doppelgänger, “not only representing [Connie’s] mythic, irrational side…but also a cluster of insights into the violence and sexuality of adulthood” (Weinberger 205). He goes on to identify that Connie’s trance-like state is induced by music, which fosters an environment where she can confront her other self. In the story, there are repeated mentions of music playing in the background. It’s present as she flirts with boys, dreams, and when Arnold pulls into her driveway. As Weinberger explains, music in the story carries a near-religious power for adolescents, acting as “the medium through which adolescents attempt to derive the meaning of life,” and Arnold himself emerges from this soundscape like a vision summoned by Connie’s subconscious (Weinberger 207). He goes on to argue that Arnold “does not exist—which makes him no less ‘real,’ since ‘phantasy is a mode of experience’” (Weinberger 212), suggesting that Arnold is not a literal predator, but a projection shaped by Connie’s want for passage into adulthood. Despite the depth of these symbolic readings, both Wegs and Weinberger risk detaching Arnold from the very realistic behaviors he exhibits, like grooming, manipulation, and coercive control. Weinberger contends that Arnold knows so much about Connie (her name, her family’s location, her friends, etc.) because “he is she” (212). This interpretation overlooks how such detailed knowledge could instead indicate stalking. Similarly, Wegs’ alignment of Arnold with the devil leads to her suggesting that Connie’s fear is actually a hidden form of desire, a notion that dangerously veers into victim-blaming. This becomes especially problematic in moments like Arnold’s declaration, “I’m gonna come inside you where it’s all secret and you’ll give into me and you’ll love me” (Oates). These are not abstract symbols but explicit threats, delivered by a character whose behavior closely resembles that of real abusers. Both Wegs and Weinberger reveal layers of symbolic meaning in Arnold’s character, but their interpretations can inadvertently overshadow the realism in Oates’ depiction of male predation and adolescent fear, which shouldn’t be reduced to a metaphor.

While many critics emphasize the surreal elements of Connie’s experience with Arnold, A.R. Coulthard explains his reverent belief that the story’s interpretations should be devoid of any allegorical analysis in his article “Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’ as Pure Realism.” Coulthard convincingly argues that readers who see Arnold as a demonic figure risk missing the very real threats the story depicts, “To reduce ‘Where Are You Going’ to a teenage dream and to raise Arnold Friend to a superhuman symbol is to rob the story of its elemental power,” he writes. “Arnold Friends do exist, and the evil they do is not safely confined to the literary dreamworld” (Coulthard 510). His insistence on grounding Arnold in reality aligns with how Oates constructs his character, not as a spectral being with magical power, but as a manipulative man who mimics teen culture to groom and intimidate girls. Coulthard further supports this idea by describing what appears to be Oates’ real-life inspiration: The 1965 murder of 15-year-old Alleen Rowe, done by a 23-year-old man known for impersonating youth through dyed hair, heavy makeup, and stuffed boots to appear taller—just like Arnold Friend (Coulthard 506). These homogeneous details emphasize that Arnold is not a metaphorical monster, but a calculated predator modeled after real ones. However, while Coulthard is persuasive in his realist interpretation of Arnold Friend, his understanding of Connie as a character is far too diminishing. He says, “Connie’s problem is that she has no sexual fear, uncertainty, or guilt, not even in a repressed form. There is nothing psychologically complex about her. She is simply a pathetic teenager who isn’t reared very well” (Coulthard 506). This view not only misreads Connie but also strips the story of its emotional nuance. To suggest that Connie is entirely without fear or internal conflict overlooks the subtle tension Oates builds throughout the story. Connie’s daydreams may be filled with boys “pressed up against her,” but those dreams are tinged with unease, confusion, and even dread. Oates writes that these daydreams, often sparked by fleeting encounters, eventually dissolve 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” (Oates). This shift from romanticized desire to a formless and almost ominous blur reveals a deeper conflict within Connie. She pursues validation, yet she is overwhelmed by the feelings that accompany it. The lack of specificity in the “single face” and the abstract “idea” signals that Connie is still emotionally unprepared for intimacy, and that her fantasies may be more about identity formation than actual sexual readiness. Her life is marked by contradiction: she projects confidence in her appearance yet remains insecure about her worth and future. Later, when faced with Arnold Friend, this internal tension becomes externalized. Connie’s instinctive fear, her physical symptoms of panic, and her ultimate dissociation all show that she does not move passively or simplistically through life. Instead, she is navigating the confusing, emotionally charged threshold between girlhood and adulthood. Coulthard’s refusal to acknowledge this complexity flattens Connie into a one-dimensional character, ignoring Oates’ deliberate portrayal of a young woman whose emerging sexuality is marked by uncertainty and susceptibility. On the contrary, Coulthard’s claim about Connie’s mental state at the end of the story is much more convincing. The story reads,

“She felt her pounding heart. She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either… She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited… ‘My sweet little blue-eyed girl,’ he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.” (Oates)

Her slow, trancelike departure from the house is not a symbol of transcendence or spiritual surrender, but something closer to a trauma response. As Coulthard says, this ending should not be allegorized into a metaphorical bad dream, because doing so dulls the unsettling horror of Connie’s psychological collapse. Her compliance is not willing submission but a dissociative reaction to fear, and a grim depiction of what it means to be psychologically overwhelmed by violence.

*‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’* is often interpreted as the psychological exploration of an adolescent fantasy rather than a real encounter, due to the story’s ambiguity. The story reads that Connie’s family believes her “mind was filled with trashy daydreams,” indicating a propensity for fantasy that blurs the line between reality and imagination. It’s also frequently pointed out by critics that right before Connie encounters Arnold Friend, she takes a nap outside, “dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her” (Oates). Critic David Gratz believes, “There is much evidence that Connie dreams Arnold Friend” and that “Connie’s experience is a ‘daymare’” (Gratz, 55). Gratz builds upon the work of critics Joan Winslow and Larry Rubin, who believe that Arnold Friend is a subconscious manifestation of Connie’s uncontrollable sex drive. However, Gratz’s opinion diverges from those of his references when it pertains to the extent of Connie’s underlying worries,

“As we try to evaluate how much credence to give her views, it is important to recognize that it is not only destruction by her ‘sex drive’ she fears. In fact, there is much evidence that it is the whole prospect of change, or growing up and getting older, which really frightens her… She really is afraid of growing up” (Gratz, 55, 56).

While Gratz acknowledges that Connie’s entire narration of the story may not be based in reality, he doesn’t concede Winslow and Rubin’s belief that her burgeoning sexuality is the singular force that will single-handedly lead to her demise. Drawing to such a conclusion can be reductive, as it pins the blame for Connie’s suffering solely on her femininity and natural coming-of-age experience. Gratz’s analysis alone summons a realistic understanding, in which Connie’s fear stems not just from sexual desire but from the broader, more existential anxiety of change, growing up, and the inevitable loss of youth. This fear is subtly reflected in the way Connie regards her mother. As she observes, “Her mother had been pretty once too, if you could believe those old snapshots in the album, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie” (Oates). Connie’s remark can be laced with both contempt and fear: She dismisses her mother’s former beauty while implying that her mother resents her for what she’s lost. The comment unveils Connie’s concern with the fleeting nature of beauty and her fear that growing up means becoming invisible, bitter, or begrudging. Overall, Gratz accepts the possibility that Connie may have dreamt her encounter with Arnold but still recognizes Connie’s emotional reality without reducing it to fantasy or moral punishment. This practical understanding aligns with a more psychologically driven interpretation of the story, where its surreal structure shouldn’t dilute the validity of her internal struggles.

Connie’s relationships with the women in her life, along with her understanding of femininity, reflect a world shaped by internalized misogyny and the conflicting expectations for young women. Connie’s concern with vanity is consistently divulged in the story through mentions of her long flowing hair and attention-grabbing walk: “[Connie] knew she was pretty and that was everything” (Oates). This line exposes the foundation of Connie’s identity—not built on independence or one’s personal validation, but on how she is seen by others, specifically men. Connie’s mother doesn’t hide her disapproval of this, snapping, “‘Why don't you keep your room clean like your sister? How've you got your hair fixed—what the hell stinks? Hair spray? You don't see your sister using that junk’” (Oates). Connie’s mother positions Connie’s sister, June, as the standard of modesty and discipline, using her qualities of cooking and cleaning as a foil to criticize Connie’s prioritization of her attractiveness. June is referred to as Connie’s frumpy older sister, whose value lies in her conformity to traditional gender roles and living a narrow, domestic life. This reflects the feminist critique of how a woman’s worth is often measured by her ability to serve and nurture others, rather than her individuality and personal aspirations. Moreover, despite the harsh words her mother says to her, her mother still favors her over June: “Her mother preferred her to June because she was prettier…” (Oates). This belief underscores the contradictions of feminism: While Connie is scrutinized for caring about her appearance, she is also temporarily rewarded for it. The mother’s simultaneous criticism and preference suggest that beauty remains the dominant form of female value, even as it’s policed and shamed. Connie recognizes that her beauty can give her a kind of power, but it also comes with constant judgment and no real protection. This concept allows predators like Arnold Friend to take advantage of young girls’ naivety about how exactly they’re perceived. He uses affectionate language as manipulation, mirroring the romantic ideals Connie fantasizes about, making his threat more confusing and difficult to identify, especially since she was never cautioned about this by any authority figures in her life. The title “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” poses a question that Connie’s parents never cared to ask.

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” transcends a singular interpretation, artfully layering symbolic and social commentary. The story’s ambiguity doesn’t diminish its impact but amplifies the unsettling reality of young women navigating a world that simultaneously idealizes and endangers them. Whether Arnold Friend is a supernatural entity, a figment of Connie’s subconscious, or a realistic threat to society, his presence highlights the varying vulnerabilities that welcome exploitation. Overall, Oates’ narrative not only serves as a cautionary tale, but a thoughtful exploration of the dangers that lurk beyond the threshold of innocence.

Works Cited

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