Connie Turns Fifty: "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" as Postmodern Experience

Nancy Barendse
Charleston Southern University

When Joyce Carol Oates wrote "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" in 1966, Connie, her protagonist, was fifteen years old. That means she would have reached fifty by now, an appropriate milestone to warrant re-examining her life and the story. In it, Oates shares with us one baby boomer's harrowing coming of age. For the past thirty-five years, readers have responded to Connie's predicament in a variety of ways, with each way finding ample support in the text.

What we think happens to Connie after she leaves with Arnold Friend—Oates deliberately leaves us hanging—depends on how we picture Arnold. If he can't walk in his boots because he has cloven hooves, *clearly* he plays a satanic role. If he speaks song lyrics to Connie in a sing-song voice, *clearly* she has dreamed him up after falling asleep while listening to the radio. If at thirty Arnold still ogles young girls at the drive-in, *clearly* he is a stalker. If his plans aid Connie in her transition from child to adult, *clearly* he acts as her savior, rescuing her from the confining and loveless household in which she grew up.

Clearly, there is no one right way to interpret Arnold. It is his ambiguity that makes this story work well in an introduction to literature course—and as an introduction to literary theory. Instead of learning about postmodernism as theory, with "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" students can experience it. Because I teach at a church-related school, some of my freshmen students already know about postmodern relativism in a mostly negative, theological context. I use this story to introduce them—in very basic terms—to postmodernism as a critical theory. By having them read critical articles presenting competing interpretations of the story, I want them to see that how we frame a question influences the answer. How we categorize Arnold determines the outcome of Connie's encounter with him. And how we complete the story governs what we can infer as Oates's purpose for writing it.

Early critical response to "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" identifies Arnold as the devil in an allegory of evil attacking innocence. Connie's fate must be rape, at the least, and more likely murder. The evidence supporting this satanic or supernatural evil view of Arnold includes his boots that may conceal cloven hooves, the X he uses to mark Connie that seems to hang in the air "almost visible" (699), the numbers on his car that add up to 69, his eyes like chips of broken glass that permit him a supernatural vision of Connie's family across town at the barbeque, the flies, his deceptive sweet talk, the fact that he can't enter the house, his lack of distinction between the living and the dead, his speech to Ellie which Oates describes as an "incantation" (705)[1]. He arrives at Connie's house in just the right disguise, with the shaggy

hair and tight jeans and scuffed boots that all the guys wear, and a white shirt just "a little soiled" (698). Connie describes "[h]is face [as] a familiar face" (698), the face of Our Old Friend.

So why would Oates pit a naïve fifteen-year old girl, whose "sacred building" (694) is a drive-in restaurant, against Satan himself? Marie Urbanski identifies the story as an existential allegory, with Arnold and Connie as the Serpent and Eve in the Garden, the original seduction story (White par. 13). Terry White describes Connie's situation as "the religious paradox of a soul free to choose when no choice exists" and Oates's purpose as allowing us to witness Connie's moment of recognition: being pretty is not enough when confronting the evil in the world. Her self-absorption leaves her unprepared and helpless (par. 13), leading to a sad conclusion for Connie but a moral lesson for readers.

The second wave of critical responses define Arnold as just a dream—a nightmare, for sure, but still just a figment of Connie's imagination. The dream arises from Connie's obsession with and fear of adult sexuality. Larry Rubin outlines persuasive evidence for viewing Arnold as "a dream-like projection of [Connie's] erotic fantasies" (59). First, says Rubin, Connie can only dream about sex because she still has no real experience with it. When Connie indulges in her "trashy daydreams" (694), the boys she thinks about "dissolve into a single face that [is] not a face but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with . . . the music and the humid night air of July" (695), an idea, a feeling that reappears as Arnold's "face [that is] a familiar face" (698). In the paragraph before Arnold arrives at Connie's house, Oates describes the "gentle rise and fall of [Connie's] chest" as she lies on her bed in an "airless little room" (696), obviously falling asleep. Not only do Arnold and Connie listen to the same radio station, but Arnold speaks dialogue based on song lyrics in a voice that alternates between sing-song and a stage voice, between the voices of the singers and the voice of the DJ. Rubin accounts for Connie's inability to dial the phone as typical nightmare paralysis. Finally, in sacrificing herself to protect her family, she gives herself an altruistic excuse to do what she has been told not to do (57-59). Arnold's more bizarre features, such as his boots and makeup, his shifting appearance, don't need explaining in a dream.

By making Connie's encounter with Arnold a dream, Oates can focus on Connie's transition from child to adult in a way that lets Connie see the consequences of her behavior without having to pay with her life. The dream interpretation allows the story to function like a fairy tale, a story to help children grow up. As Rubin concludes, if the point of the story is only Connie's physical danger, then it becomes "merely a luscious gumdrop for gothic horror fans" (59).

In reaction to dream and allegorical readings, A. R. Coulthard argues that the story should "stand on its solid realism" (505). He claims, "What proves that [Oates] didn't ["mysticize" Arnold Friend] is the story's consistent naturalism. Absolutely nothing occurs that can't be explained in purely literal terms or that isn't best explained so" (506). Drawing on an article by Tom Quirk,

Coulthard establishes convincing parallels between "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and Charles Schmid's murder of Alleen Rowe in 1965. Like Connie, fifteen-year-old Alleen was home alone, having just washed her hair, when she was taken into the desert and raped and murdered by Schmid and an accomplice. Like Arnold, Schmid was short and several years older than the three girls he killed. He also drove a gold car. Although dying his hair instead of wearing a wig, he did wear make-up and black leather boots stuffed with cans and rags to make himself seem taller (506). Oates doesn't have to imagine such strange details when real-life provides them. Coulthard debunks Arnold's supernatural powers as guesswork and the kind of information available to a stalker. To say Arnold is just a dream "takes the edge off the genuine horror of Connie's fate" (508). It is this horror that signals Oates's purpose: a critique of American culture. Connie, who fills the vacuum in her life with loud music and romantic movies, is being badly raised by careless parents (506-07). She has no defense against what she cannot recognize—a "pathological pervert" (509) like Arnold Friend or Charles Schmid. For Coulthard, "to reduce 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' to a teen-age dream and to raise Arnold Friend to a superhuman Symbol is to rob the story of its elemental power" (510). Oates's message becomes a warning cry that evil exists.

The view of Arnold that readers find most surprising—and that my students resist most—is that of savior. Mike Tierce and John Michael Crafton, among others, argue this position, citing as evidence Arnold's X as a symbol of Christ, the 33 in his secret code, and Connie's whisper of "Christ, Christ" (696) as Arnold drives up to her house (220). They recognize Arnold's close association with—indeed, creation out of—the music (221), the music Oates compares to music at church: "it was something to depend upon" (695).

Tierce and Crafton's strongest claim rests on the connection between Arnold and Bob Dylan, in appearance and in message. Dylan's height, his hair, his "long and hawk-like" nose (698), his "fast, bright monotone" voice (697) provide the physical model for Arnold (Tierce and Crafton 221). Dylan's honest lyrics, calling for change, for freedom, for new beginnings, challenge the syrupy romantic notions found in Connie's usual music. Her reaction to Arnold's directness—"People don't talk like that, you're crazy" (701)—transforms, as he talks, into a willingness to go with him, to accept his version of reality: "The place where you came from ain't there anymore and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. The place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing . . . The hell with this house!" (704). Because Arnold is a fantasy created from the "perpetual music" (700) Connie uses "to drown out the quiet" (696), he cannot harm Connie physically, only open her eyes to "the vast sunlit reaches" of adulthood "that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it" (705). Oates's purpose for creating a terrifying character as the protagonist's rescuer is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's agents of grace. Arnold shocks Connie awake, freeing her, say Tierce and Crafton, to perceive a new vision of her

future (224).

When confronted with such a wide range of interpretations, students invariably ask, "Why doesn't someone just ask Oates what she meant?" Oates has been asked, several times, and she has provided answers and other statements that seem to support each version of Arnold. In an interview with John Knott and Christopher Keaske, Oates says, "Arnold Friend is a fantastic figure: 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" (qtd. in Coulthard 505). Then in David Rosenberg's book *Communion: Contemporary Writers Reveal the Bible in Their Lives*, Oates explains how the story of Adam, Eve, and the Serpent filled her childhood (Samway par. 2). Thus, can we infer that Oates intends us to see satanic qualities in Arnold? Yes.

Note, however, that in the same comment to Knott and Keaske she also identifies Arnold as a figure of fantasy and a dream. Tierce and Crafton observe that Oates uses the phrase "as if" more than thirty times, casting doubt on Arnold's reality (222). In the Afterword to her collection of selected early stories, Oates refers to her protagonist as "the presumably doomed Connie" (qtd. in Kalpakian par. 7), suggesting that she does not agree with those who see Connie's rape and murder as inevitable. The dream version of Arnold lets Connie live.

What about Arnold as a flesh-and-blood pathological pervert who permits Oates to critique American society? In *New Heaven, New Earth: the Visionary Experience*, Oates writes, "It may be that [the artist's] role, his function, is to articulate the very worst, to force up into consciousness the most perverse and terrifying possibilities of the epoch, so that they can be dealt with and not simply feared" (qtd. in White par. 5). The serial murderer and the sexual predator, personified by Arnold, certainly qualify as some of the worst developments of our time.

And the reverse—Arnold as savior? In discussing the influence of the Bible in her life, Oates describes the Garden of Eden story as "the loss of childhood innocence and the inevitable (*and perhaps desired*) expulsion from the parental home" (qtd. in Samway par. 2, my emphasis). Although the process may be fearful, the child must grow. Arnold's role is to talk Connie out of her daddy's house.

In her Preface to *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America*, Oates writes, "A new morality is emerging in America . . . the democratization of the spirit, the experiencing of life as meaningful in itself, without divisions into 'good' and 'bad,' 'beautiful' or 'ugly,' 'moral' or 'immoral'" (qtd. in Daly 104). Arnold saves Connie by relieving her of the need to draw "thick clear lines" (695) between herself as a good girl and bad girls such as her friend Nancy Pettinger. Once beyond the issue of her virginity, Connie can experience life "as meaningful in itself." She can move into "the vast sunlit reaches of land behind [Arnold] and on all sides of him" (705), into a new level of freedom. Arnold stands ready to guide her into this new world. As farfetched as this view may seem at first, given the threatening

nature of Arnold's character, it is clearly the position taken by Joyce Chopra in her 1986 film version of the story, *Smooth Talk*. Oates reviews Chopra's film as "accomplished and sophisticated" and does not take issue with Chopra's ending, citing her own story's lack of an ending as "unfilmable" (qtd. in Daly 103).

With no dominant position taken by critics and no help from Oates, readers must fall back on themselves to find a way to interpret Oates's story. At this point, students should be receptive to a basic explanation of postmodern thought. They can see in the controversy over Arnold Friend what Stanley Fish means when he says, "[T]here are no determinate meanings and . . . the stability of the text is an illusion" ("Text?" 529). Oates presents them with mutually exclusive and concurrent meanings—or, as a colleague writing an introduction to literary studies explains, "the oxymoron of multiple determinate meanings" (Brown). Fish writes, "Postmodernism maintains . . . that there can be no *independent* standard for determining which of many rival interpretations of an event is the true one" ("Condemnation" par. 2, my emphasis) and that "it is in the name of *personally* held norms and values that the individual acts and argues" ("Text?" 532, my emphasis). With this story, students can see that the same applies to the interpretation of literature. When Richard Rorty advises readers to think of literature not as a path to the truth but as a tool to help them get what they want (Linn 33), students can stop trying to decipher what Oates really means—hasn't Barthes already established that the author does not give meaning to a work? (Linn 25)—and they can focus instead on which interpretation helps them to understand their own lives.

The connection postmodernism posits between language and thought is that our public language creates our private thoughts (Linn 25). As Fish notes, to interpret someone's words as having a particular meaning, one must already be thinking in that context ("Text?" 529). Therefore, the cultural moment at which we encounter this story influences what we infer as Oates's meaning. Every semester when my classes take up this story, I am intrigued to see which interpretation becomes the popular one. In the mid-80s, when finding Satanic symbols on album covers was the rage, Arnold as the devil ranked high. Today, students prefer Arnold as just a bad dream, I think because it lets us off the hook. Nothing bad actually happens to Connie, and she learns not to be such a flirt. A nightmare Arnold supports a conservative moral position. In addition, we don't have to acknowledge responsibility for contributing to a culture that produces the likes of a flesh-and-blood Arnold Friend, who today might use Internet chat rooms instead of rock and roll to lure Connie out of the house. My students nowadays may be more in touch with their feminine sides, but most aren't quite feminist enough to find Arnold as rescuer meaningful.

So where is this paper going and where has it been? Through her unsettling story Oates forces students to examine the events in light of their own values as she provides us with a teachable moment for introducing Postmodern thought. Just as Bob Dylan continues to release new music, Connie in middle age finds "vast sunlit reaches" of critical theory toward which to lead us.

Note

[1]Critics who describe Arnold's satanic characteristics include Christina Marsden Gillis, "'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?': Seduction, Space, and a Fictional Mode," *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981): 65-70; Marie Urbanski, "Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 15 (1978): 200-203; Joyce M. Wegs, "'Don't You Know Who I Am?': The Grotesque in Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, Linda W. Wagner, ed., Boston: Hall, 1979, 87-92; Terry White (see Works Cited); Joan D. Winslow, "The Stranger Within: Two Stories by Oates and Hawthorne," *Studies in Short Fiction,* 17 (1980): 262-268.

Works Cited

Brown, James S. Personal interview. 19 March 2002.

Coulthard, A.R. "Joyce Carol Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' as Pure Realism." *Studies in Short Fiction* 26 (1989): 505-510.

Daly, Brenda O. "An Unfilmable Conclusion: Joyce Carol Oates at the Movies." *Journal of Popular Culture* 23 (1989): 101-14.

Fish, Stanley. "Condemnation Without Absolutes." Editorial/ Op-Ed. *New York Times* 15 October 2001. Available <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/15/opinion/15FISH.html>.

---. "Is There a Text in This Class?" *Critical Theory Since 1965.* Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1986: 525-533.

Kalpakian, Laura. *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*: *Selected Early Stories*. Review. *Southern Review* 29 (1993): 802 (6). Available on InfoTrac Expanded Academic database, A14755997.

Linn, Ray. *A Teacher's Introduction to Postmodernism.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1996.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 8th ed. Eds. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. New York: Longman, 2002. 693-705.

Rubin, Larry. "Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Explicator* 2.4 (1984): 57-60.

Samway, Patrick H. *Communion: Contemporary Writers Reveal the Bible in Their Lives*. Review. America 16 March 1996: 18 (2). Available on InfoTrac Expanded Academic database, A186202290.

Tierce, Mike and John Michael Crafton. "Connie's Tambourine Man: A New Reading of Arnold Friend." *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 (1985): 219-225.

White, Terry. "Allegorical Evil, Existential Choice in O'Connor, Oates, and Styron." *Midwest Quarterly* 34 (1993): 383 (15). Available on InfoTrac Expanded Academic database, A13999393.