

Notes on: "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" by Joyce Carol Oates

In A Nutshell

First published in 1966, Joyce Carol Oates's eerie "**Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?**" became an instant classic. It's regularly included in literary anthologies of "great" fiction, and better yet, it was even adapted into a popular 1986 film, *Smooth Talk*, starring Laura Dern.

According to Oates, the story was inspired by a *Life* magazine story about the serial killer Charles Schmid, who, like the story's villain, was an older man who preyed on adolescent girls. Was Oates struck by the gruesome serial killer? Nope. What stuck with her was "the disturbing fact that a number of teenagers – from 'good' families – aided and abetted his crimes" (source). It wasn't the twisted psychology of serial killers that intrigued Oates, but the abnormal actions of "normal" teenagers who helped Schmid either carry out or conceal his murders.

Part of what makes Oates's story so freaky is that it deflects most of the attention away from the would-be killer – who is still rendered totally terrifying as the creepy Arnold Friend (shudder) – and directs attention to the victim, Connie, and her "normal" social circle.

The story is set in 1960s middle-American, and the ideological turmoil of the times simmers just below the surface. You know about the 1960s – it was a decade when moral and social conventions were being challenged left and right, and the rush of American optimism and materialism after World War II was being questioned. (Think *Mad Men* time period.) This was the time of the civil rights movement, the birth of the hippie counterculture, and the wild popularity of rock bands like the shaggy-haired Beatles. Issues such as feminism, sexual freedom, and adolescent sexuality were hot topics.

The story itself has generated controversy since its publication. Oates has described Connie's actions at the end of the story as an "unexpected gesture of heroism," a decision to sacrifice herself so that her family would remain unharmed. But not all critics are convinced. Some read the story as an anti-feminist allegory: Arnold Friend is Connie's punishment for having sexual feelings for boys. Others read the story as a feminist critique of a male-dominated society: the ending is essentially tragic, Connie's submission to Arnold Friend standing for the ways women are oppressed in a patriarchal society. Some even read the last scenes as evidence of Connie's psychosis: there's no ennobling act here, just a fragile psyche falling apart (see Showalter's "Introduction" for a broad sketch of the debate).

Multiple, conflicting interpretations – that's the risk the story takes in leaving the ending open-ended. The "vast sunlit reaches of land" that dazzle Connie at the end of the story may well be the vast array of interpretations that generations of readers bring to it, and why the story continues to captivate us today. So, get reading, and decide what you think of this creepy little story.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Girl meets boy.

Boy breaks up with current girlfriend to date girl.

Current-now-ex girlfriend hates new girl.

Boy goes back to ex-girlfriend.

Ex-girlfriend and friends bully girl.

Girl dies.

The year? It could be 1964, when Mary French and another teen helped her on-and-off boyfriend, Charles Schmid, abduct and murder Alleen Rowe, inspiring Oates's short story. Or 2010, when Flannery Mullins and two other teens were charged with bullying Phoebe Prince, a girl who had brief relationships with their boyfriends, who ended up committing suicide. Incidents such as these hit close to home because they're not random occurrences or tragedies that happen to people who live far away. They're horrible things that ordinary people do and ordinary people suffer from. When does hateful language go too far? What drives seemingly normal people to go to such heights of cruelty? And what is it about love or sexual desire that makes people susceptible to violence and even murder? "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" continues to resonate because the drama that inspired her story back in 1966 continues to play out, tragically, in our society today.