

# Cultural identity in modern american short stories literature review

[Life](#), [Friendship](#)



Modern American fiction often concerns itself with identity; the individual is often at stake in part of a larger group, whether it be a family, village, or the societies of a big city. Perhaps it is the very nature of American fiction to place identity at the core of much of its short fiction; as a relatively young country that evolved quickly through colonial times and the industrial revolution, its population comes from around the world yet still seeks to define itself as a nation. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the diverse fiction of America, the theme of identity is wrestled with by writers in many different ways. Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, Joyce Carol Oates's *Where Are you Going, Where Have You Been?*, and James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues* all deal with identity, albeit in different ways.

Shirley Jackson's short story, *The Lottery*, the theme is less about individual identity than cultural identity. To describe the atmosphere of the village in the story as "carnival-like" is apt in not only its conventional sense but also its etymological sense. While some critics have argued that this sort story is merely a "parable of the evil inherent in human nature" and not "an assault on mindless, cultural conformity," it is really both of these things ("Jackson's *The Lottery*" 226). Conformity and individuality have always been at odds in American fiction, because as a nation America has struggled to gain its independence from other nations by establishing itself as different and individual, while simultaneously trying to establish a national identity. Jackson's story plays into the American fears of forgotten traditions as well as its fear of leaving behind old ones.

The yearly lottery, held on June 27 every year, is part of ordinary life in village events along with "the square dances, the teen-age club, the

Halloween program” (Jackson ##). The fact that the lottery is a time-honored tradition is established when Jackson writes, “ The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born (Jackson ##). The villagers talk about constructing a new box, but it never happens; When a villager mentions that “ over in the north village, they’re talking of giving up the lottery,” the village elder responds by describing the north villagers as a “ Pack of crazy fools” (Jackson ##). These things express the ambivalence America feels toward sticking with its roots versus striking forth with new cultural traditions and identity. There is a sense that if the old is replaced with something new, as with the box, even if the spirit of the thing continues, that something will be lost. The horrifying end of the story, as the lottery winner for the year is stoned to death by her fellow villagers, could represent any flawed tradition that has outlasted the memory of its origins, such as slavery and segregation. When it comes to tradition and cultural identity, Jackson’s story implies, there is more evil in forgetting the reasons for its existence and continuing with it blindly than in striking forward with reason to discard those that are no longer useful or create new ones.

Joyce Carol Oates’s story, *Where Are You Going, Where Have you Been?*, also uses a horrific situation to highlight the theme of identity through 15-year-old Connie to show the bland cultural nature of mid-20th century America. Literary critic A. R. Coulthard writes that when it comes to this short story, “ the tendency among . . . commentators is to equate Arnold Friend with the Devil himself and to ‘ mysticize’ the story into a dream allegory,” but that he

believes the story should be left alone to “stand on its solid realism” (“Pure Realism” 505). He offers a comparison to another short story, Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown*, because the dream allegory is actually suggested by the author in several ways, whereas in Oates’s story, “No such narrative signals or unreal occurrences appear” (“Pure Realism” 507). Viewed as a more realistic versus mystical piece of fiction, the story keeps its readers hooked with the personal details of an adolescent girl’s life as well as the damsel-in-distress situation she will not survive after Arnold Friend arrives at her door. However, the point of the story is less about the murder readers assume is about to happen than the bland life that Connie has lived in her middle-class American family up until that point.

It only takes a couple of pages for Oates to fully describe Connie’s daily life in detail. Even today, everyone has known a girl just like Connie, one whose parents care little about what she does, where she goes, or whom she has been with. Even though Connie’s parents appear not to care much about their daughter’s activities, Connie still feels compelled to act one way at home and another way when she is out with friends. For example, Oates writes, “She wore a pull-over jersey that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home,” in which the reader assumes Connie transforms the shirt into a sexier look to assist her in her and her best friend’s favorite activity, meeting up with boys (##). It is no Sistine Chapel that the girls frequent, but a “bright-lit, fly-infested restaurant, their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed up out of the night to give them what heaven and blessing they yearned for” (Oates ##). Here, the girls separate as they

are led off by boys, who take them to drive-in restaurants and dark alleys in their cars. This appears to be the pinnacle of Connie's life, for she is not depicted as having any imagination or identity past her nights out with boys and her daydreams of those nights out while she is at home.

Oates spends much more time describing the confrontation between Connie and Arnold Friend on the afternoon she is left alone at home during summer vacation, although the story rapidly picks up pace because this part of the story includes much more dialogue. There is nothing like an imminent murder to highlight the pathetic cultural poverty of young Connie's life. As she faces the man standing at her door, she finds that everything about Arnold Friend is eerie. Connie asks him how old he is, and he says that he is eighteen, although Connie can see "that he wasn't a kid, he was much older—thirty, maybe more" (Oates ##). His strange appearance and the many facts he knows about Connie herself, her friends and her family finally convince her that Friend is not a friend or a good guy, but a man with bad intentions. Oates writes, "She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not going to sleep in my bed again" (##). Oates has highlighted the mediocrity of the American middle-class lifestyle, its lack of ambition, its lack of imagination, its poverty of culture, and lack of overall identity by presenting the abrupt ending of the life of a typical girl.

James Baldwin's short story, *Sonny's Blues*, deals more directly with the theme of identity than either of the other pieces. Literary critic Donald C. Murray writes, "To be aware of oneself, Baldwin believes, is to feel a sense of loss, to know where we are and what we've left behind" (355). Identity may be a struggle to find in the categories that are set up by the

surrounding culture. For example, Baldwin “viewed the concepts of ‘Negro’ and ‘homosexual’ as categorical ghettos invented by mainstream culture: ‘People invent categories to feel safe,’” he said (Elliot 2173). In *Sonny’s Blues*, although Baldwin is writing about Harlem of the mid-20th century, a place renowned for its poverty, the setting of the story is rich with character, details, and culture that Jackson’s and Oates’s stories do not have. As the narrator, the elder brother, an algebra teacher, deals with the fact of his younger brother Sonny’s arrest, incarceration, and return home from jail, he traverses a labyrinth of personal feelings to adapt to each of these situations. At first glance, the narrator appears to be a rigidly straight-laced man who has taken the “safe” path and finished an education to rise from the bottom of his impoverished Harlem childhood. The reader gets the impression that he neither looked right nor left on his personal journey to stay on the right path, and has perhaps missed out on some important aspects of life because of this. However, as critic Murray writes, “He is not quite the self-satisfied conformist which some critics have made him out to be” (354). The narrator’s contemplates cynically, “here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could” (Baldwin ##). However, underlying the obvious cynicism is a thoughtful man on a quest not only to understand what has happened to his brother as an addict, and why, but also a man trying to understand his own place and identity in the confusing maze that life presents.

Upon Sonny’s return from jail, the narrator contemplates extensively about

the past, especially his parents. He recalls a story of his father he learns only after his death, a promise he made to his mother to look after Sonny, and how he mostly forgot his promise to his mother until her own death. He recalls a long conversation he had at the time of their mother's death in which he asked Sonny, "What do you want to do?" (Baldwin ##). He remembers Sonny later saying to him, "I hear you. But you never hear anything I say" (Baldwin ##). All of this contemplation leads him to take more special care with Sonny when he returns from jail, and to step out of his own zone of comfort to visit a jazz club and watch Sonny perform. As he listens to the music, he realizes that the music was not about "anything very new. He and his boys were up there keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen" (Baldwin ##). It is through this maze of categories of things like "schoolteacher," "junkie," and Harlem's tough streets offering "ruin, destruction, madness, and death" that Sonny and his brother do the hard work of creating, maintaining, and evolving their personal identities. One can imagine that Baldwin's story is also not "anything very new," because people struggle in poverty, with their careers, addiction, and family members returned from jail every day in America. Like the jazz musicians, the transformative thing that Baldwin has done with his short story is to find a "new way to make us listen" to this common story by utilizing beautiful language as well as counting upon the readers' innate curiosity to learn more about the lives of his realistic characters. Unlike Jackson's and Oates's story where the future seems locked in for their characters, Baldwin's expresses the mobility of an American's identity, the possibility of seeking

for new and different ways to see things, to live.

Though the three stories are very different, they all hold in common the theme of American concern with identity. There is no simple answer to the question, " what is an American?" and these stories, in their diversity, illustrate that well. For some, it may be a struggle with past and future tradition, as in Jackson's story. For some, life and self-identity play out in a scripted manner and would probably continue to do so until the end, unless interrupted by a fantastic situation, as in Oates's story. For others, there is no script, but an everlasting endeavor to keep creating the self, as with Baldwin's characters. Yet all of these are American, and each has a place in the complex nature of describing the theme of American identity.

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