

Where are you going,
where have you
been?" essay



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Where Have You Been? " Joyce Carol Oates's short story, " Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? " was written in 1966 and twenty years later was made into a movie entitled Smooth Talk, winner of the 1985 U. S. Film Festival for best dramatic picture.

The writing by Oates is loosely based on a true story described as " the tale of Charles Schmid, a twenty-three-year-old who cruises teenage hangouts, picking up girls for rides in his gold convertible" (Johnson 160).

I say " loosely based" since the author purposely omits facts that she has read in newspaper and magazine articles, facts that would lend humanness to the demonic nature of a man she has cleverly and ironically named Arnold Friend. The producer of Smooth Talk, as is often the case, also takes detours from the road of reality by further developing the characters of Connie's mother, father and older sister, June.

The reader/viewer might have a tendency to question then just what is true and what is not; it hardly matters, since both are a departure from the truth. The movie's and the story's description of young Connie are similar.

Connie is described by the author as an attractive fifteen year old who " had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors" (Oates 148) and who wore clothing " that looked one way when she was home and another way when she was away from home" (Oates 149).

The movie, starring blonde Laura Dern as Connie, depicts a teen who glances frequently in store-shop windows to view her image, a young person with " two things on her mind, boys and how she looks" (Smooth Talk cover). While

the physical characteristics seem similar, however, the description of Connie's sexual nature differs, playing an important part in the development of the final scenes of both the story and the movie. While the writer of *Smooth Talk* portrays Connie as a flirt and a tease, she, nevertheless, resists going "all the way" with the boys she cruises with on summer nights.

This makes the compelling seduction by Arnold Friend at the screen door that much more chilling as she faces rape and the loss of innocence to someone she hardly knows. In contrast, by implying in her short story that Connie is already sexually active, author Joyce Oates deepens the terror of the screen-door meeting by focusing not on just the sexually persuasive nature of Arnold Friend but also on the demonic trance-like state he uses in order to control his victims. Apparently the authors of the three critical interpretations differ, too, in their views of whether Connie has been sexually active prior to her meeting with Friend. Greg Johnson states, "Oates makes clear that Friend represents Connie's initiation not into sex itself" she is already sexually experienced "but into sexual bondage" (161), while Joan D. Winslow argues that Connie has "not yet experienced sexual intercourse, but she is moving toward it" (162). Both the movie and the story emphasize the dramatic separation of understanding between Connie and her mother.

The apparent lack of depth in Connie and her father's relationship dims in comparison to the almost-tangible hatred Connie seems to feel toward her mother, her mother "who had been pretty once too, but now her looks were gone, and that was why she was always after Connie" (Oates 148). Despite the anger she feels, however, it is her mother that Connie cries out to for

help in both versions as she sees herself forced to give into Friend's wishes in an attempt to spare her family the evil he hints will come their way if Connie fails to obey him.

She hangs up the phone as he requests, sickening fear replacing former cockiness. That said, the endings then vary greatly. In *Smooth Talk* we see Connie leaving the house with Friend, then returning sometime later to find her family is back home, the unseen rape having left her shaken but belligerent toward her attacker. The family members receive her in a surprisingly warm fashion, and she finds herself securely held first in the arms of her mother and then in those of her sister as the two girls ends the movie dancing slowly to the music Connie loves.

Arnold Friend is hopefully out of her life forever, and Connie is left to pick up the pieces with what we assume is renewed love and respect for her home and family. Whereas we see a coming together of the family members in the movie's ending, the sinister ending of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" implies that Connie will forever be separated both physically and spiritually from her family. How can we help not feeling repulsed at the frightening image of Connie's murder by the demonic Friend?

We are, but while this ending seems grotesque, it remains true to the author's certain eerie flavor of danger which we have seen slowly building and building. The inevitable terrible climax that Oates has skillfully woven into the plot finally arrives.

I would have to say the movie then fails to do justice to the story; however, I suspect only the most devoted horror-movie fans would bother to complain.

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