

A fiend in disguise in  
joyce carol oates'  
"where are you going,  
where have you be...



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A Fiend in Disguise in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie, a 15 year old in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a prideful and churlish girl who has a habit of belittling others and boasting about her good looks. At first, the story seems to be about a self-absorbed and sexually active smug girl who gets herself noticed by a sexual predator. However, a closer inspection of the story, and a decryption of Arnold Friend's name and the numbers 33, 19, and 17 reveal deeper theological and moral themes. By laying out the evidence that Oates presents in her story, it becomes clear that Connie was not kidnapped by a sexual predator, but lulled away by the devil for overly committing the same sin that got him tossed out of heaven.

According to Bibleinfo. com, pride is one of the seven deadly sins, and Connie's vanity and pride are made apparent in the very first paragraph of the story. Connie had a habit of "Craning her neck to glance into mirrors, or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right" (Oates 664). Connie's mom would constantly reprimand Connie for staring at herself, and would urge her to be like her sister June who was constantly praised by everyone, but Connie would disregard her mom and believed herself to be better than June because she knew that "she was pretty and that was everything" (Oates 664). Connie even believed that her mother "preferred her to June because she was prettier" (Oates 666). Belittling and mocking others was another way that Connie and her friends would feed their pride. When someone that amused them walked by, they would "lean together to whisper and laugh secretly (Oates 664), and when a boy that they did not like invited them over, it made them "feel good to be able to

ignore him" (Oates 665). Connie also committed other sins such as lying to her mother, fornicating with multiple guys, and not going to church on Sundays. Connie admits that she lies to her mother a lot when she thinks that her "mother is so simple" (Oates 666), and that "it was maybe cruel to fool her so much" (Oates 666). She would even lie to her mother about what she does when she goes out with her friends. While her mother believed that Connie was simply hanging out at the mall with her friends and going to the movies, Connie was actually meeting older guys at a drive in restaurant, going to eat with them, and then would go hang out with them in an "alley a mile or so away" from the restaurant where they ate. (Oates 665). In fact, Connie had met so many boys in this way that when she would daydream about the boys she met, they all "fell back and dissolved 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 666). Lastly, Connie did not go to church on the Sunday morning that Arnold Friend showed up on her door because no one in her family "bothered with church" (Oates 666). Oates is an Atheist (Humanism and its Discontents), as a result, it may seem inappropriate to analyze the story through a theological perspective.

However, the plethora of subtle religious allusions make it clear that Oates intended for the story to be read with Christian theology in mind. Firstly, Oates clarifies that the family is Christian by explaining that they did not bother to go to church on Sundays. Secondly, removing the letter R from the name Arnold Friend produces the words an old fiend. This suggests that Arnold Friend is at the very least a monster or a demon if not the devil. The

final and most evidently theological allusion in the story are the numbers on Arnold Friend's car: 33, 19, and 17. As pointed out by Nick Courtright, by counting the books of the Old Testament backwards, the 33rd book from the end is Judges, and chapter 19 verse 17 of Judges says "And when he had lifted up his eyes, he saw a wayfaring man in the street of the city: and the old man said, "Whither goest thou? And whence comest thou?" This is old English for the title of the story "Where are you going, where have you been?" By understanding that the story can be interpreted through a theological perspective, it can then be proven that Arnold Friend is the devil. The devil is very manipulative; "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (The Holy Bible: New International Version, Gen. 3. 1). Arnold Friend is also very cunning and manipulative. He had a "simple lilting voice" (Oates 669), spoke in a "singsong way" (Oates 670), "his smile assured her that everything was fine" (Oates 669), and he began the conversation by flattering her and telling her that she is cute. When Connie found out that Arnold Friend was not as young as she first thought and tried to lock the door, he manipulated her into believing that not even iron can protect her from him by saying, "It's just a screen door. It's just nothing. I mean anybody can break through a screen door and a glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all and specially Arnold Friend. If the place lit up with a fire honey you'd come running out into my arms" (Oates 672). He compares the house to a cardboard box that he can "knock down at any time" (Oates 675). In this way, Arnold Friend manages to manipulate Connie into feeling helpless, especially when he tells her that if her parents were to come they would just end up getting hurt too. The devil is also a master of deception and disguise.

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“ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11. 14).

Satan shows himself as something appealing or attractive to win the confidence and trust of humans. The story mentions that Arnold Friend was in disguise multiple times. He comes dressed in the way teenage boys dressed so that Connie could relate to him and she “ liked the way he dressed, which was the way they all dressed” (Oates 668). She thinks he is attractive because of the “ hard small muscles of his arms and shoulder” (Oates 668), his eyes “ that catch the light in an amiable way” (Oates 669), and because his face seemed familiar. However when Connie noticed that he is not as young as he first appeared, she started noticing other things about him, such as how he “ placed his sunglasses on top of his head, carefully, as if he were indeed wearing a wig” (Oates 671), and by how it seemed to her that his “ whole face was a mask” (Oates 672). Finally, Connie noticed that “ one of his boots was at a strange angle, as if his foot wasn’t in it. It pointed out to the left, bent at the ankle.” (Oates 672). Many believe that the devil has hooves for feet, and this would explain why his “ feet did not go all the way down” (Oates 673), and why the shoe would bend at such an odd angle. Arnold Friend also seemed to know a lot of information that he should not have known and was able to do things that a human cannot do. Since the story is based in the 1960s, Arnold could not have possibly found out Connie’s name and the name of her friends through social media as that did not exist then, yet he was able to name all of them, even though Connie does not remember ever seeing him. He also said, “ I know your parents and sister are gone somewhere and I know where and how long they’re going to

be gone, and I know who you were with last night, and your best friend's name is Betty" (669). Arnold Friend knew where Connie lives, when and how long her parents would be out, and where they went to. He was able to describe what Connie's parents were doing from where he stood as the narrator said, "squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Tillie's backyard" (Oates 671). Lastly, Arnold Friend drew an X in the air, and "after his hand fell back to his side the X was still in the air, almost visible" (Oates 670), another ominous sign of his true nature.

Living a prideful and sinful life, Connie in Joyce Carol Oates' "Where are you going, Where have you been?" attracts the attention of what at first seems to be a sexual predator. However, by decrypting Arnold Friend's name by removing the R, and realizing that the title of the story lies in Judges 19: 17, as alluded towards with the numbers 33, 19, and 17, it becomes clear that Oates meant for the story to be interpreted through a theological perspective, regardless of her atheistic beliefs. This, coupled with the similarities that Arnold Friend shares with the devil, leads to the conclusion that Connie was not kidnapped by a sexual predator, but whisked away by the devil, who committed the very first sin, pride, and was thrown out of heaven because of it.

## **Works Cited**

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