

**The Dynamics of Coercion and Fear in
“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”,
a story by Joyce Carol Oates¹**

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1. “Sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised songs”

Among the four hundred stories written by Joyce Carol Oates, the prolific “dark lady of American letters”, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is the most anthologized one, commonly praised as a good example of the gothic genre: tense, macabre, disturbing (Showalter 3). Published for the first time in the Fall 1966 edition of *Epoch Magazine*, the story became an immediate success among fans and critics, such as Linda F. Wagner, who recognized it as a masterpiece (Wagner 1979). This narrative portrays the traumatic coming of age of Connie Wyatt, a typical American teenager, about to be seduced by a psychopathic killer.

The plot of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” was inspired in the profile of mass murderer Charles Schmid, written by journalist Don Moser, and published in the March 4, 1966 issue of *Life Magazine* (Quirk 413-419). Moser describes him in these terms:

At the time of his arrest last November, Charles Schmid was 23 years old. He wore face make-up and dyed his hair. He habitually stuffed three or four inches of old rags and tin cans into the bottoms of his high-topped boots to make himself taller than his five-foot-three and stumbled about so awkwardly while walking that some people thought he had wooden feet. He pursed his lips and let his eyelids droop in order to emulate his idol, Elvis Presley. He bragged to girls that he knew 100 ways to make love, that he ran dope, that he was a Hell’s angel. (Moser 23-24)

With the help of other adolescents, Schmid brutally murdered three girls — Alleen Rowe, Gretchen Fritz and Wendy Fritz, of 15, 17 and 13 years —, and buried them in the desert, outside Tucson, being later arrested and convicted of homicide (Daly 101). In her story, Oates

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imagines a hypothetical dialogue between a psychopath like Schmid, reincarnated by Arnold Friend, and a possible victim, Connie. These characters symbolize evil and good, experience and innocence, threat and vulnerability. The spirit of this narrative recalls those folk ballads that approach the “death and the maiden” theme, or, more vaguely, the famous song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue”, composed and sung by Bob Dylan, one of the author’s favorite musicians (Knott and Reaske 17-19).

The “maiden” of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, Connie, can be described in few words: young, beautiful, naïve. Like the vast majority of adolescents, this girl undergoes the rituals of her age: she flirts with schoolmates, has fun in hamburger shops, cinemas and malls, and dreams awake. Connie believes in romantic love, as defined in popular culture (Oates 2016, 2162), but she is inexperienced in relationships:

She and that girl and occasionally another girl went out several times a week, and the rest of the time Connie spent around the house — it was summer vacation — getting in her mother’s way and thinking, dreaming about the boys she met. But all the boys 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 2162)

Connie can be perceived as a collective character, almost a stereotype of the American adolescent, during the sixties and afterwards. Frequently, Oates’s narratives revolve around common people who face grotesque situations, external threats (another individual or society itself) or internal fears and phobias (Bender 2159). Such characters propitiate the adherence to bizarre plots, which challenge the frontiers of verisimilitude, and could discourage a more skeptical reader.

The techniques of psychological manipulation employed by Arnold in this story correspond to some of the strategies defined by George K. Simon, a specialist in the field of personality disorders: lying; covert intimidation, brandishing anger; guilt tripping (Simon 82-87).

The young man’s goal is to explore the vulnerability of others — in this case, Connie’s lack of experience — in order to obtain what he wants (Simon 22). The result is a narrative charged with suspense and with an ambiguous ending, which fictionally illustrates the dynamics of manipulation and fear, as I will explain in thorough detail in the next pages.

2. “You wanta come for a ride?”: strategies of manipulation

The event that triggers the action occurs on a Sunday morning, when Connie’s parents

and sister leave home to participate in a barbecue organized by an aunt, leaving the young lady alone. “None of them bothered with church” (Oates 2162), states the narrator, a seemingly superfluous detail, but which acquires a symbolic meaning. The reference to the mass points towards an organized ritual of a religious nature; Connie’s coming of age also constitutes a rite, a prologue to teenage seduction games, which may end with an unwanted sexual experience or a mortal sacrifice.

Arnold’s car, described as “an opened jalopy, painted a bright gold that caught the sunlight obliquely” (Oates 2163) — a symbol of power and masculinity in American culture — is parked in front of Connie’s house. At first, the girl reacts with anxiety to this unexpected visit: “Her heart began to pound and her fingers snatched at her hair, checking it, and she whispered, ‘Christ. Christ,’ wondering how bad she looked” (Oates 2163). At this stage of the story, Connie does not remember having seen the vehicle a few days before, outside a restaurant frequented by high school students. By then, in a gesture that may be interpreted as a presage of the narrative’s conclusion, “[Arnold] wagged a finger and laughed and said ‘Gonna get you, baby’” (Oates 2161).

Arnold introduces himself in a rather peculiar way: “I’m Arnold Friend and that’s my real name and I’m gonna be your friend, honey, and inside the car’s Ellie Oscar, he’s kinda shy” (Oates 2164). As Joan Easterly notices, even Arnold’s surname is suspicious: “Friend assures Connie that he is her ‘friend’, but the dropping of the two r’s transforms the name into ‘an old fiend’ (...)” (Easterly 538).

Other hints contribute to the oddity and the ambiguity of the communicative situation. Both the young man and his friend, the disturbingly silent Ellie, wear mirror glasses, which prevent Connie from seeing and interpreting their facial expressions. In spite of Arnold’s relaxed look, calm tone of voice and seductive strategies, the young lady notices the absurdity of the situation:

She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt, and even that slippery friendly smile of his, that sleepy dreamy smile that all the boys used to get across ideas they didn’t want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the singsong way he talked, slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy, and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come together. (Oates 2165)

The first obvious sign of danger appears when Arnold, to overcome Connie’s marked reluctance, resorts to lying and informs her he is her age. The girl becomes suspicious since

Arnold's demeanor and the lines around the corners of his mouth indicate that he was at least eighteen. Also, when observing Ellie, she realizes, in shock, that he was an adult: "he had a (...) hairless face, cheeks reddened slightly as if the veins grew too close to the surface of his skin, the face of a forty-year-old baby" (Oates 2166).

When Arnold insists that Connie joins him for a car ride, she refuses and orders them to leave:

'You two better leave.'
 'We ain't leaving until you come with us.'
 'Like hell I am —'
 'Connie, don't full around with me. I mean — I mean, don't full around,' he said shaking his head. He laughed incredulously. (Oates 2166)

This conversation is written with the almost complete absence of dialogue tags, allowing the reader to concentrate in the tension. In face of Connie's refusal, the young man abandons the seduction strategy, and resorts to a covert intimidation, through veiled threats (Simon 87). Arnold proves he knows where Connie's family is, subtly emphasizing, the girl's isolation and concomitant vulnerability:

'If my father comes and sees you — '
 'He ain't coming. He's at a barbecue.'
 'How do you know that?'
 'Aunt Tillie's. Right now they're uh — they're drinking. Sitting around,' he said vaguely, squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Tillie's back yard. Then the vision seemed to get clear and he nodded energetically. 'Yeah. Sitting around. There's your sister in a blue dress, huh? And high heels, the poor sad bitch —, nothing like you, sweetheart! And your mother's helping some fat woman with the corn, they're cleaning the corn — husking the corn —' (Oates 2167)

The absence of Connie's parents plays a determinant role in this narrative, as Joyce Wegs argues: "Because he [Connie's father] does not 'bother talking much' to his family, he can hardly ask the crucial parental questions, 'Where are you going?' or 'Where have you been?'" (Wegs 88). Realizing no one can help her, the teenager enters into a spiral of terror: "Connie stared at him, another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her, so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur standing there against his gold car (...)" (Oates 2167).

Dizziness and breathing difficulty are two typical reactions of those who suffer a panic attack. This term describes the sudden terror experienced by an individual in face of a dangerous situation, a real or imaginary threat (Tubridy 4). The word *panic* originates from Pan, the God of forests, shepherds and flocks, in Greek mythology. It was a sinister creature, half man and half

animal, with the horns, ears, legs and hooves of a goat. He lived in caves or wandered in the mountains, hiding, occasionally, to spy on the nymphs, or terrorize anyone who got in his way, with a frightening scream, so dreadful some people would die immediately. As Fernand Comte explains:

Perhaps it was Pan's rages — like the singing, cries and noises which surrounded him and the caves where he took refuge, all slightly irrational things — which led him to be considered responsible for the uncontrollable "panics" experienced by the Greeks of antiquity. He was the God of the inexplicable. (Comte 156-157)

A panic attack involves a series of complex physiological responses: the individual experiences a sudden and intense fear; palpitation, respiratory distress; and the blood rapidly flows to the limbs. Both in animals and humans, that constitutes a primitive reaction, a system of defense, with the objective of preparing the organism to the urgency of the fight or flight (McNally 3).

Realizing Connie's frailty, Arnold resorts to an authoritarian speech, a strategy psychiatrists describe as "brandishing anger", destined to scare and subdue the victim:

'Now, what you're going to do is this: you're going to come out that door. You're going to sit up front with me and Ellie's going to sit in the back, the hell with Ellie, right? This isn't Ellie's date. You're my date. I'm your lover, honey.'
'What? You're crazy —'
'Yes, I'm your lover. You don't know what that is but you will,' he said.
'I know that too. I know all about you. (...) I'll tell you how it is, I'm always nice at first, the first time. I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me —' (Oates 2167)

In face of Arnold's authoritarian and angry tone, Connie's fear becomes pure panic: "Her heart was almost too big for now for her chest and its pumping made sweat break all over her" (Oates 2167). When the teenager retreats inside the house, and threatens to call the police, Arnold resorts, once again, to a veiled intimidation: "You don't want your people in any trouble, do you?"; "you don't want them to get hurt" (Oates 2170). With these words, the young psychopath instills in Connie a guilty feeling: if she does not conform to his wishes, her family will suffer the consequences.

Panic controls Connie, who exhibits a panoply of hysterical reactions: she trembles uncontrollably; lacks the strength even to hold the telephone; cries for her mother; experiences breathing difficulty; and, finally, succumbs to exhaustion:

She was hollow with what had been fear but (...) was now just an emptiness. All that screaming had blasted it out of her. She sat, one leg cramped under her, and deep inside her brain was something like a pinpoint of light that kept going and would not let her relax. She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet. (Oates 2170)

Without resistance, Connie becomes an easy prey for Arnold. Like in an incantation — the term the narrator employs to describe the atmosphere of persuasion created by the psychopath —, the teenager walks towards him. Connie's destiny is not sealed or revealed by the narrator, but it can be easily inferred by the reader, thanks to the last words of the story:

'My sweet little blue-eyed girl,' he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him — so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it. (Oates 2171)

3. In the abyss of myth

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a story that echoes the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades, lord of the inferior world; the terrific power of Pan; or the legends of Death and the maiden, that renaissance paintings, such as *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (1517), by Hans Baldung Grien, or contemporary art, like *Death and the Maiden* (1915), by Egon Schiele, immortalized. The inexperience of the maiden and her beauty contrast with the wisdom of Death, represented by a man or older god, and reinforce the erotic innuendo of those pictorial representations.

Numerous legends and pictures present a moral lesson or a warning against the dangers incurred by a maiden at the hands of a malevolent and experienced man. In this sense, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" can be read as a bitter criticism to the indifference of parents in contemporary western society. Connie's mother is a superficial person, while her father shows little interest in the teenager's social life: "he never bothered to ask what they had done when he came to pick them up at eleven" (Oates 2160). Significantly, the names of her mother and father never appear in the narrative, which may point towards their minor role in Connie's education (Keilbach 4).

In conclusion, this is a fable for modern times, urbane and somber, and also a clever study on coercion and fear. Furthermore, it reveals the deep knowledge Oates has of the human

complexity and her capability to create stories that resonate both in our individual minds and in the strange caves of myth.

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Abstract

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (1966) is Joyce Carol Oates’s most celebrated and anthologized short story, adapted to the cinema in 1985 (*Smooth Talk*, directed by Joyce Chropa). The narrative was inspired by a *Life* magazine article on serial killer Charles Schmid, who murdered several girls just to know what it felt like, and by the author’s interpretation of Bob Dylan’s famous song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue”.

The tense plot presents a persuasive and menacing young man, Arnold Friend, who tries to convince Connie Wyatt, a fifteen-year-old girl, to join him for a car ride. Connie declines, feeling there is something wrong with the charismatic, but rather insisting and loquacious, young man. Thwarted by the girl’s repeated refusals and excuses, Friend becomes increasingly more threatening, and menaces Connie’s family (currently absent from home).

The tense dialogue that occurs between both characters — a masterpiece of suspense — shows the power of coercion and the strategies it resorts to, namely (1) trickery, (2) manipulation, and (3) threat. At the same time, thanks to Connie, the reader becomes aware of the different responses to coercion. There is a well-structured crescendo that includes (1) anxiety, (2) fear, (3) panic, and probably — the ending is ambiguous — (4) submission. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” proves that rational strategies to cope with fear are futile when the threatening individual is a manipulative psychopath, well aware of the girl’s weaknesses, and the potential victim is an insecure young person.

In this paper I intend to analyze (1) the dynamics of coercion and fear; (2) different strategies used in the process of coercion; (3) several responses to threat; (4) how they are represented in this story, in terms of literary strategies, in order to create a suspenseful situation. To substantiate my analysis, I resort to the studies of several specialists in the field of gothic literature, criminal psychology, and, naturally, to my own opinions.