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Critical Analysis of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

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In the fictional story, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?," Joyce Carol Oates tells a thrilling story about Connie, a young fifteen year old girl, who is put into a life or death situation when a stranger, Arnold Friend, manipulates her into his car. Connie is a very vain and self-centered girl searching for social acceptance. She uses her attractiveness to get the attention of all the boys which makes her feel mature and wanted, but in Arnold's eyes, she makes for an easy target of manipulation. This meeting makes her realize that she is not as mature as she believes herself to be. Connie's reactions throughout this story give the reader confirmation that this meeting is a part of her dream. Proof from the story and multiple critics' analyses has lead me to believe that Connie's encounter with Arnold Friend is a dream.

Connie's dream begins when she refuses to attend her family party and stays home sun bathing and day dreaming about love and the boys she has met. The narrator first tells us that "Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun" (22), meaning that Connie must have fallen asleep. In addition to that, the narrator writes, "and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was...She shook her head as if to get awake" (22). This line is the start of Connie's horrible nightmare. After this scene, the narrator describes Connie as she "lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest" (22). The choice of words the narrator uses in this line describes a person who is falling into a deep sleep. The adjective 'languidly' presents the idea that she is weak or sluggish from exhaustion. Also, the characteristics of Connie's breathing are ironically the same as a person who is asleep. In the critical analysis, "Impure Realism: Joyce Carol Oates's 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,'" D.F. Hurley describes this story as having "enough liquid consonants to furnish a lullaby" (373). Referring to the same line, Hurley supports my theory and explains, "Sleeping (or dozing), then waking (or seeming to awaken), then experiencing a visual alienation from the familiar and the familial (often expressed in the 'shrinkage' of the previously known)--all these changes are characteristic of dream vision tales. Even the use of the 'as if' does as much to call attention to the possibility of sleep as it does to push it aside" (373). This line then transitions into the beginning of Connie's nightmare when Arnold Friend first arrives in her driveway.

Many critics have argued whether the encounter between Connie and Arnold was a dream. For example, A.R. Coulthard's analysis disagrees with this theory and states, "Connie's dream-like state at the end of the story is of another type. It is the nightmare sense of unreality of a person who knows she is about to be murdered" (508). This argument is easily settled by Hurley's explanation of Connie's overheated sleep and nightmare. Hurley supports the theory by comparing the lines, "She sat on the edge of her bed, barefoot, and listened for an hour and a half to a program called XYZ Sunday Jamboree..." (22) with "After a while she heard a car going up the drive. She sat up at once, startled..." (23). Hurley explains by saying, "But she was already sitting on the side of her bed, according to that earlier very concrete description. And why the vagueness of 'after a while' compared with the matter-of-fact accuracy of the previous expression, 'an hour and a half?'" (374). Hurley is on point in supporting this theory. This

vocabulary is used throughout by the narrator to give the reader more evidence to believe the encounter was a dream.

Connie's thoughts about her previous day at the restaurant have become a part of her dream. Connie saw Arnold while he was in his convertible at the restaurant. In the line, "And his face was a familiar face, somehow..." (25), the narrator makes it clear that Connie thinks there is something familiar about Arnold. This line is the first incidence when Connie describes Arnold as familiar. A person's dreams are often about something they were thinking about during the day or something that is on constantly on their mind. In the line, "She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt..." (27), again, Connie recognizes Arnold. He was on her mind earlier that day and is now the main character in her dream.

Multiple times throughout this story, Connie does not remember where she is, just like in a dream. During dreams one may find themselves in places they have never been before, a place that was made up by one's dream. In the line, "The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but which wasn't good enough wasn't going to help her," (30) the narrator provides more evidence to believe that this encounter is a dream. There is no other logical explanation for Connie to not remember what her own house looks like. Again, in the line, "Her eyes darted everywhere in the kitchen. She could not remember what it was, this room" (30), Connie is unable to recognize what is in her home. This room is not a part of Connie's home; it is clear that this is the made up setting of her dream. In the last sentence of the story the narrator states, "So much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it" (34). This is the last statement the reader is left with making Connie's fate uncertain. During this line, Connie is outside of her house looking out into what she should recognize as her neighborhood, but she doesn't because she is dreaming.

The encounter that Connie experiences with Arnold Friend leads one to conclude that he is a creation of her dream. To begin, Arnold Friend knows everything about Connie. From the line, "I took special interest in you, such a pretty girl, and found out all about you like 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. Right?" (26), the reader can conclude that Arnold knows too much about Connie. How could someone that Connie has never met before know every intricate detail about her life? Another example is provided in the line, "She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were safe back somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited" (34). The narrator describes how Connie "watches herself" as she about to leave with Arnold. There is no possible way for a person to physically watch their own self perform a specific action unless they were having an out of body experience during a dream.

Everyone has woken up from a dream thinking it was real at some point in their lives. In Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" the reader can conclude that this story is Connie's realistic dream. Connie's familiar reaction to Arnold Friend and her "home" are evidence that this encounter is a dream. The narrator provides numerous examples directly from this short story to support this theory. These examples allow the reader to identify

the start of Connie's dream as well as the specific characteristics of her nightmare. The narrator leaves the reader to decide Connie's fate, which is waking up from this awful nightmare relieved that her dream was not reality.

Works Cited

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" *The Mercury Reader*. Ed. Jacqueline Wilson-Jordan. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2012. 18-34. Print.