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Literary Theory

Feminist Criticism

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Patriarchal Domination in Joyce Carol Oates "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Joyce Carol Oates plays upon the female gender stereotypes through her victimized adolescent character, Connie, in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*. Naivety and inexperience are two characteristics that portray Connie as a weak teenager, desperately seeking to find her identity in a world where women are expected to act a certain way. Connie falls victim to the advances of a man because she lacks masculine guidance in her life, and falls prey to the stereotypical female role of subordination. Her role of subordination is due to the patriarchal society that keeps women beneath men through domination and exploitation. Any attempt to break free from the chains of patriarchy will ultimately end in demise or rape. Through the abandonment of her father, and the restrictions of a patriarchal society, Connie's death is inevitable, regardless of any attempts to fight patriarchy.

The absence of men in the lives of the women is stressed in Oates short story, as Connie's father is described as "away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed" (Oates 312). However, even through the absence, the men hold a strong power over the women. Connie desperately desires any attention from her father. Author Jessica Benjamin argues that through Freud's theories, we desire a form of authority, and this

authority is developed through the social order of patriarchy (Benjamin). Through domination the need for obedience occurs through the desire for love. Connie desires her father's love and attentions, and because of a patriarchal society that deems men as the hierarchy, Connie desires male dominance.

Benjamin begins her theoretical process with the first step of male domination through differentiation. She argues that women must first distinguish themselves as different than others (Benjamin 12). Connie differentiates herself specifically from the women in her own family. Connie's sister, June, is a dutiful, plain woman who spends her days filled with domestic duties, and a job as a secretary. Both her job and her tasks at home place her in a subordinate role to men, but one that Connie's mother and the rest of society praise. Connie's mother is also described as a plain, nagging woman who is constantly "dragging [Connie] back into the light" of reality (Oates 314). Independence and exploration are two things that Connie desires, but are also incapable of being retrieved.

In an attempt to gain some form of independence, Connie chooses to lead a double life. She presented herself innocently at home, and more provocative in the real world as she "wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way at home and another way when she was away from home" (Oates 313). Author Jane Barstow argues that adolescents have created a "code of dress" that allows them to dress and act a certain way in search of authority in attempt to "fill the void of absent adult authority" (Barstow). Connie struggles to imitate an older, more mature woman while in the real world, but her second identity is forced, as even her laugh is "high-pitched and nervous" anywhere other

than her home (Oates 313). Connie's struggle for an identification as a maturing woman from her father causes her to seek attentions elsewhere.

Initially, Connie enjoyed the attention her provocative alter ego provided her with male cat-callers and a young Eddie. Although, they are not satisfying enough as Connie describes the boys faces that "dissolved into a single face that was not even a face, but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with urgent insistent pounding of the music and the humid night air of July" (Oates 314). This lack of satisfaction is due to the conflict that Benjamin claims is caused by "the recognition of the self, yet the need for others to recognize them as well" (Benjamin 32). The craving desire of receiving attention is what causes Connie's unconscious desire to be dominated. Common patriarchal chains inhibit Connie from realizing that her father's love and attention is the only type of love that will satiate her.

Attention from fathers, however, is not possible in this American suburban lifestyle as Connie's father, and other fathers who drop their daughters off at the mall, fail to provide attention and involvement (Oates 313). This causes a state of vulnerability for impressionable female adolescents who then feel the need to seek attention from other male figures. Author Jane Barstow argues that the Americanized patriarchal society prohibits women from being able to distinguish the evils present in society (Barstow). Without being able to distinguish moral character versus evil, female adolescents can fall prey to seducers like Arnold Friend. Arnold Friend is described as familiar and similarly dressed like "all the rest of them" (Oates 317). He encompasses the majority of the male individuals that Connie likes and is attracted to simply because of the familiarity of him. The evil underlying presence of Arnold is undetectable to Connie as she has not been taught how to spot a man with bad intentions.

American societal ideals have always placed men above women, giving men ultimate authority in both the public and private spheres. Connie, like other female adolescents, is taught the importance of obedience to patriarchy. With an uninvolved father, Connie is unconsciously forced into the open arms of a rapist through the struggle to gain attention from an older male figure. Connie's struggle to gain independence in a patriarchal society only pushes her closer towards her demise, as Oates critiques the lack of power patriarchy provides women with.

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Drawing by Joyce Carol Oates courtesy Celestial Timepiece, University of San Francisco. Anyone who doubts a short story's capacity to pack a powerful punch hasn't yet read the much anthologised and analysed short story by Joyce Carol Oates "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?". Set in the mid-1960s, it is a tale that can be read as a crime story, an allegory, a snapshot of a shifting culture, a moral parable and a statement on feminism. Connie cannot have it all. High-minded feminist principles won't protect our daughters from predators, and Oates offers neither solutions nor apologies. It's an allegorical tale that has been retold countless times but in the retelling, Oates highlights a serious barrier to the advancement of women's rights. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" opens with a short physical description of the narrator, Connie, in the form of a comparison to her mother. Connie, who is 15 and very beautiful, has a habit of checking her face in mirrors to reassure herself that it is still as beautiful as it has always been. Her mother disapproves of this habit: "Stop gawking at yourself."