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The Complex Protagonist in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

The main character Connie in Joyce Carol Oates’s short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is the most typical of teenage girls. She is attracted to freedom and finds it by going out with friends and seeking attention from boys. In doing these things Connie exercises an untethered curiosity, a quality of her personality which is reflected through an absence of understanding and concern for common dangers. The girl’s eventual encounter with the predatory Arnold Friend—a character whom is very clearly defined as the story’s antagonist through a barrage of sinisterly actions and words—is subtly bridged by way of her unconscious decisions. Though she may be identified as the protagonist, Connie serves a more significant but transparent role as the story’s second antagonist, a quality which is thoroughly enshrouded by Arnold Friend’s grandiose wickedness.

The story begins through the descriptions of a teenage girl, Connie, along with elements of her home life. She is an ordinary fifteen year old in that she is a little too self-absorbed and carefree. Connie is pretty, and she receives confirmations of this from the regular scoldings of a mother who “hadn’t much reason any longer to look at her own face” (381). Her older sister is boring and plain, usually being regarded as the preferred child, where the father is disengaged, filling his days with work, sleep, and keeping mostly to himself around the house. Away from home and family Connie adjusts her demeanor and seeks attention from the world, especially from boys: “Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk that could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head, her mouth which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out, her laugh which was cynical and drawling at home—‘Ha, ha very funny’—but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else” (381). One evening, during an excursion with a girlfriend, Connie meets a boy and decides to go alone with him back to his car. It is at this point in the story where she experiences a brief first encounter with Arnold Friend, spying him some distance away in a parking lot and watching as he “wagged a finger and laughed and

said, 'Gonna get you, baby'" (382). This event is both portentous and strongly associated with Connie's unscrupulous decisions and present actions.

During the time leading up to the girl's fateful second meeting with Arnold Friend, additional details are provided about Connie and her family. It is learned that she frequently and handily fools her mother during their personal conversations, only entertaining the notion afterward that it may be wrong to do so. Likewise, the mother regularly complains on the phone about one family member to another; and whenever Connie is brought up the mother casts her in a disapproving light. The family is not "bothered with church" (383) and Sundays are instead used for irregular activities—like going to a barbecue—and also for each member to do solitary things. Connie's obsession with boys is succinctly elaborated in a way which also provides additional perspective on the girl's impending peril: "thinking, dreaming 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" (382). In essence, the yarn of this family is in many ways not so strong and perhaps continues to unwind as the years go by. These are quiet hints at Connie's upbringing and represent certain possibilities for her future.

When Arnold Friend reenters the story Connie is alone at her family's house. He arrives unannounced and from out of nowhere in a bright gold jalopy. He has also brought along a rough looking sidekick named Ellie Oscar. Recalling his discomfiting actions from their first meeting and considering the frighteningly intrusive context of the second, it is immediate that Arnold Friend becomes a serious threat to Connie, and that there is potential for him to turn into something far worse. During their conversation he says things like "We ain't leaving until you come with us" (387), and all the while makes increasingly shocking statements that reveal the truly terrible possibilities of his presence: "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—" (388). Arnold Friend is slowly able to coerce Connie to leave with him because he so thoroughly represents the girl's infatuation with boys: cool looks, smooth talk, fancied set of wheels. One can also consider Connie's aforementioned "idea" or "feeling" as a necessary means to escape the trappings of her life, and to this Arnold Friend becomes the personification of her freedom. These are reasons why he is successful at his

task, even though the experience puts Connie in a state of vulnerability and danger that is as much frightening and unfamiliar to her as it is suffocating.

At this point in the story Arnold Friend is so clearly and conspicuously evil that it is difficult to recall what occurred previously. Connie's behaviors and poor decisions, which are supported and explained through important details about her and her family, are what provide the connection to the girl's horrible predicament. Connie's carelessness importantly augments Arnold Friend's character while it simultaneously explains his existence.

It seems natural to view the main character Connie as the protagonist in Oates's short story, but a recount of her actions reveals that being the victim of Arnold Friend is the only thing that lends her this attribution. A truly fitting protagonist does not appear throughout the entire story. Never does Connie make any positive or careful decisions, nor does she do any good for herself or for anyone else. Not once does the teenage girl do or say anything that suggests she was capable of avoiding or willful enough to flee the danger she discovered. Connie can only be mistakenly perceived as "good" when she is compared to the menacing Arnold Friend, to whom the author consistently alludes as being the devil himself: "he had shaggy, shabby black hair that looked crazy as a wig and he was grinning at her" (384). Arnold Friend is so evil that it makes Connie's unconscious contributions to her predicament nearly invisible. Understanding these points makes him no less terrible, but it confirms that Arnold Friend and Connie are similar in an important way: they are both responsible for the events that unfold.