

TRANSITION IN JOYCE CAROL OATES' "WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE  
HAVE YOU BEEN

by

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A Major theme in the short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates is the transition from the domestic world to the outside world. Oates uses the repetition of disguises and appearances in the harsh adult world and emphasizes the honesty and safety of the youthful domestic world to draw contrast between the two realms, and to show Connie’s transition from one to the other.

Connie signifies a transitioning from the innocent and honest domestic world to the harsh and artificial outside world. She is growing tired of the domestic world, and wishes to break away, but at the same time she is still uncomfortable in the outside world, therefore causing “everything about her to have two sides to it” (Oates 822). When she is living in her domestic world, she does not bother to wear makeup or style her hair and feels no need to disguise herself. Connie’s sister June represents domesticity. She lives at home even though she is twenty four-years old, and is described as plain, and steady. June never seems to feel the need to disguise her face for the outside world. Even though June is older than Connie, Connie is more eager to move away from the honest plain and steady domestic world into the more harsh and dynamic outside world.

Because Connie is still not a part of the outside world, she feels a need to alter her appearance in order to fit in. Oates puts emphasizes this aspect of Connie’s character when she writes that “she had a quick nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people’s faces to make sure that her own was alright”(Oates 821). By giving this as a primary description of Connie, Oates indicates Connie’s desire to fit into the outside world, but also her discomfort and worry that she may not be accepted. In order to disguise her insecurity, Connie works hard to keep up the appearance that she fits in, masking her discomfort in hairspray and makeup. It seems

that Connie becomes so focused on appearances that she loses the ability to see past the surface while she is in the outside world. She is so enamored with the lights and music coming from the restaurant that she doesn't seem to notice that it is fly-infested and dirty on the inside. Similarly, when she sees Arnold Friend in the outside world, she merely registers the appearance of the teenage boy that he is pretending to be; she cannot see through his disguise.

Arnold Friend is at the opposite end of the spectrum from June. He represents all of the deception, harshness, dishonesty and artificiality of the outside world. His entire character is a façade. Arnold is comfortable in the outside world where superficiality is the norm, but when he comes too close to the domestic world, both literally and figuratively, his façade falters and Connie begins to see through him. Arnold lures Connie into his world by focusing on her appearance, a pervading theme of the outside world. However, when he begins to talk about love, an entirely domestic concept, he stumbles in his charade, and Connie, instead of being attracted to him, is repulsed. Similarly, when Arnold talks to Connie outside of the restaurant, she recognizes him as "a boy with shaggy black hair"(822). When he comes to her house, the main symbol of the domestic world, she picks up on the fact that he is not who he is pretending to be. After registering that his hair and boots seem like they might be fake, she realizes that "his whole face is a mask" (829).

At this point, Oates touches on the idea that the outside and domestic worlds cannot mix without conflict, and that a person will inevitably have to cross from the domestic world into the outside world. Connie sees that Arnold Friend is a disguise for something far more sinister, but it is impossible for her to retreat back into her home.

After it becomes apparent that she must leave with Arnold, her home, her domestic world, seems fierce and unfamiliar. Even the kitchen, which had been with her for years, “looked like a place she had never seen before” (829). Arnold then threatens her, suggesting that if her house, which now seems malicious and unfamiliar as the outside world once seemed, were to light on fire, she would come “right into my arms an’ safe at home” (829). Here is the vital transition that Connie must make. Where the domestic world used to represent safety and security, now it is harsh and unfamiliar, and she has no choice now but to venture into the outside world, which now must become her safe zone.

The transition between the honest, nurturing and caring domestic world to the harsh and artificial outside world is one of the most prominent themes in this short story. Oates skillfully uses the repetition of appearance and disguise to highlight the malevolence and deceitfulness of the outside world and contrast it with the innocence and purity of the domestic world. Every reader is connected to Connie in that Connie’s fated journey from youthful domesticity to the harsh adult outside is the unavoidable journey that every reader has taken, is taking, or will take at some point in his or her life.