

USE OF MUSIC IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S "WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE
HAVE YOU BEEN?"

by

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Thomas More once described music as a “bodily pleasure that neither repairs nor relieves our bodies, but excites our senses with some hidden but unmistakable force.”

Joyce Carol Oates, who wrote “Where Are You Going, Where Have you Been?” uses the symbolism of music in her story to portray the values her protagonist, Connie, holds as a teenager. The true power of the role music plays in this piece lies in the lack of redemptive qualities it provides for Connie. Connie mistakes music as a sacred force of protection because it gives her pleasure, failing to realize that it is actually a force of self-destruction.

Oates uses music to transition between Connie’s two lives: the dull one that she lives with her family, and the exciting public one she lives with her friends. Oates takes care to point out the absence of music and how it relates to Connie’s values. For example, as Connie is in her friend’s father’s car on the way home she sees the changes in the drive-in restaurant: “...its signs that were faded and ghostly now, and over at the drive-in restaurant where cars were still circling tirelessly. She couldn’t hear the music at this distance” (823). The absence of the music in this scene signals Connie’s return to her family life and her departure from the public one. The language Oates uses to describe the signs as “faded” and “ghostly” suggests that the presence of the music kept them alight, just as its presence provided Connie with bodily pleasures of excitement and fun. In reality, the music did not keep the signs working, just as it failed to offer Connie any relief from her need to escape her dull familial life.

Later on, after Connie’s parents leave for the barbeque, “She went inside the house and turned on the radio to drown out the silence” (823-824). This reaffirms Connie’s need for excitement, but also signals her return to her public life. Connie comes

through here as being counter-intuitive in nature; normally one would turn on a radio to drown out noise rather than silence. From this, the reader learns that Connie exhibits the stereotypical teenage behavior of rebellion. Not content to relax in silence, Connie must turn to her functional equivalent of religion: music. Connie's initial act of rebellion comes when she decides to not spend time with her family at the barbeque. The alternative choice of attending the barbeque could have offered Connie something the music does not: protection. The choice to stay at home listening to music only puts Connie in the evil grasp of Arnold Friend.

Oates also uses music references as a means of conveying Connie's vulnerability. The music in the story does not have a specific title or description. This lends itself to the description of music as a "hidden but unmistakable force." Instead of the music having specific song titles throughout the story, it is anonymous and in the background; it is hidden but always present. The first mention of "the music" provides background for the importance of music to Connie and her friends: "...their thin shoulders rigid with excitement, and listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the background like music at a church service..." (822). From this, the reader realizes that Connie is excited by the music, and that to her it functions as a substitute for religion. Since it is mentioned later by the narrator that "...none of them [Connie's family] bothered with church..." (823), the reader knows that for Connie music serves as her moral equivalent in the absence of a real belief system. The absence of real religious influences leaves Connie vulnerable because she lacks a strong moral base. Connie has no reason to think that seeking idealized love and rebelling against her parents is wrong because the music teaches that those are acceptable and safe behaviors.

In the exchange between Connie and the boy known as Arnold Friend, the danger of a false reality that the music creates for Connie comes to light. Arnold is able to cloak himself in the same force that gives Connie pleasure, to a point where her judgment is clouded. When Arnold starts to reveal what he knows about Connie, he “spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song” (826). Oates gives Arnold’s voice a lyrical quality that at first suspends Connie’s doubts. This appeal to the idealized romanticism that Connie internalizes from song lyrics allows Arnold to hide behind this cloak created by music. The ending of this story illustrates the true destructive force of the music because when the music dissipates, only the silence that Connie had hoped to snuff out remains. The silence in this case represents the failure of the music to protect Connie. The music failed to provide Connie relief from the boredom of her familial life and repair her body and mind in a constructive way. It failed to instill in her the values that may have caused her to choose to attend the barbeque or not respond to Arnold’s call.

A central theme to this story is that evil often lies in self-destructive behavior. Connie’s moral equivalent in music replaces any dichotomy of right and wrong and sows the seeds of her own destruction. Her sense of naïve love and romanticism embodied by her bodily need for excitement keep her from seeing the truth of Arnold earlier and from realizing what he truly is: Satan in human form. The force of the music that resides in Connie may be her escape from the boring reality of her life, but it offers her no purification against the evil that Arnold Friend represents and no redemption for the behavior that originally brought Arnold’s attention to her.