Commentary on "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

A close reading of Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" reveals many layers of possible meaning, which makes it a fine example of literary ambiguity. You can read Oates's story as a crime story: a fictionalized account of a historical character (Charles Schmid, the Pied Piper of Tucson), or as moral parable: a cautionary tale for young girls (stay away from deceiving stalker types), or as a cultural document of the 1960's, in which the innocence of America (think Howdy Doody, the mouseketeers, teeny-boppers) was giving way to the more hard-edged, troublesome, turbulent, violent and unpredictable times (post-Kennedy assassination, the era of the civil rights movement, anti-war protests, sexual liberation, drug experimentation, and revolutionary politics) - an era that was being prophesied, announced, heralded, ushered-in by none other than Bob Dylan (among others), to whom the story is dedicated. You could also read the story from a feminist perspective (another social movement gaining credibility in the sixties) as an expression of the powerlessness and vulnerability of women trapped by their vanity (which is imposed on them by the cultural expectation that women must always be pretty), women who make easy prey for predatory males like Arnold Friend and Ellie Oscar. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is all of these things and more.   
  
Four primary themes overlap in the story.  
  
1. The theme of youthful, romantic fantasy. The illusory dreams of adolescence blind them to the harsh, dangerous world of maturity. We see Connie separating from the world of living under her mother's wing and breaking through to the other side of sexual maturity, adulthood and independence. Sexual desire can be deadly serious stuff. It takes this experience for Connie learn that. Until Friend pulls up the driveway, she has been flirting with sexuality. Now she will confront its harsher face.   
  
2. The victimization of women is explored, and how men act as predators in our society. The story intensifies the fear and suspense associated with this power differential by putting Connie in an untenable, vulnerable situation from which she has no choice but to leave the house with Arnold Friend. So this story heightens our awareness of this problem. The story asks us: is Connie really independent? Has she left the mother's nest only to live under the protection of the domineering man?   
  
3. The story represents a case study in manipulative psychology. Friend coerces Connie through intimidation and identification. He's tracked his prey, understood it, disoriented it, and is now prepared to go in for the kill. A true crime serial killer named Charles Schmid, the Pied Piper of Tucson served as the inspiration for Oates's tale. She makes Arnold Friend into a smooth talking, play acting, and ultimately menacing suitor. When interpreted from this angle, the story becomes a cautionary lesson: "don't let this happen to you!"  
  
4. Dream allegory of death and the maiden. An allegory is a narrative with at least two layers of meaning: the literal and the symbolic. The story, when read as allegory, becomes a a kind of coming of age dreamscape where evil (or death) arrives to corrupts what is innocence. Death escorts the woman away from her childhood self. You might interpret this death literally or symbolically.  
  
Joyce Carol Oates, in writing about her own story, has admitted to being inspired by Bob Dylan's music (songs like "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue") and the Life magazine account of Charles Schmid's crimes. She has also expressed a fondness for Nathaniel Hawthorne's allegorical fiction - works such as "Young Goodman Brown," The Scarlet Letter, and others. She has said that in writing this story, she was writing a kind of allegory verging on parable, so this is as good a time as any to introduce the literary terms symbol and allegory. The two are closely allied, and it makes sense to discuss them together. A symbol is a person, place, or thing in a text that suggests meanings beyond its literal sense. Symbols can suggest many associative meanings, which makes them ambiguous by definition. The white whale in Melville's Moby Dick, for instance, is a classic literary symbol. Symbols are also distinctive in that their associative power is unique to the work of art at hand. They are not prefabricated symbols; they only work symbolically within the context of the story or poem. Writers invest ordinary things with symbolic value when required by the demands of their art.   
  
**Allegory** is a lot like symbol; however, an allegory takes a person, place, or thing and gives it a single consistent symbolic value. Allegory is often used to set up moralistic fables or teach lessons (we call this didactic literature). There are always two levels of meaning in allegory: the literal, and the symbolic. In "Young Goodman Brown" by Hawthorne, the name of the protagonist is pretty obviously symbolic of the young, good, everyman. His wife "Faith" is, symbolically, his religious belief. Another example would be the book Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyan, an allegory about the Christian's journey from sin to redemption. In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" you might interpret allegorical significance to Arnold Friend, the ironically named old fiend who represents the Devil or Death personified. If Arnold is death, then you must stitch together more allegorical symbols: Connie then assumes allegorical significance as the innocent youth being tempted by the Devil, or the young maiden being seized at the peak of her beauty by the old ravager, Death. The basic distinction to remember with symbol and allegory is that allegory is a more restricted, consistent, almost mechanistic use of symbolic representation, whereas symbol is a more ambiguous and suggestive usage.   
  
Another kind of symbolic language we need to introduce at this point is the term**archetype**, which is a recurring symbol, character, landscape, or event found in myth, fable, art, music, and literature across many cultures and spanning many historical eras. One example of an archetype that applies to our Oates story is the Death and the Maiden theme. Representations of death seizing a young woman became quite popular during the Renaissance, but we find earlier examples of this archetype in mythology, such as the story of the abduction of Persephone (aka. Proserpine) by Pluto (aka. Hades or) Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, or Mother Earth. Persephone was abducted by Hades against her will and taken to the underworld in his golden chariot (cf. Arnold Friend's gold car), where he married her. Demeter was so sad at having lost her daughter that she lay a curse on the earth and a great famine ensued. Demeter appealed to Zeus for assistance, but Hades deceived Persephone into eating four pomegranate seeds, which meant that she couldn't leave the underworld even with the help of Zeus. Persephone persuaded Hades to let her return to the land of the living, on the condition that she would stay with him for 4 months; one month for each pomegranate seed she ate. Each year Hades fights his way back to the land of the living with Persephone in his chariot. Spring and summer follow. Come autumn and winter, he takes her back to the underworld, and the earth gets cold and barren. So this archetype of death abducting the young woman is as old as the oldest myths. Psychological and anthropological critics see archetypes as evidence that human beings share a "collective unconscious" or a reservoir of memories, symbols, and patterns common to the entire human race, and they have a fundamental meaning at a very deep level: they express our desires, our fears, our beliefs. Sweet-talking, smooth operator Devil figures like Arnold Friend are also archetypal: the serpent in the Adam and Eve story, the Devil in Milton's Paradise Lost, Mephistopholes in Goethe's Faust, and countless demonic villains from film and popular culture - there is something fundamentally common to them all. This is not to say that artists consistently use archetypes in exactly the same way every time. You should understand archetype more as a recycling of images and patterns from our common mythic heritage.   
  
Finally, we might also interpret "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" as a classic example of a "coming of age" story, also known as an initiation story. In such stories, the protagonist undergoes an important rite of passage, transformation, an experience of transition, usually from childhood to adulthood, or from innocence to experience. The story focuses on that turning point, that trial, or the passage from one state to the other. Reading the last page of Joyce Carol Oates's story, one can't miss the coming of age happening before our very eyes. Connie splits into two persons: one (the childhood Connie) watches the other (the grown woman) depart with Arnold Friend.   
  
Even poems such as "On Turning 10" by American poet Billy Collins and "To a daughter leaving home" by Linda Pastan can capture smaller yet meaningful transition points in life. Life is filled with rites of passage, big and small: your 10th birthday, the day you first rode a bicycle without training wheels, the day you got your driver's license, your first job, the sweet sixteen party, the confirmation, the bar mitzvah, graduation, initiation into a secret society, marriage, the loss of virginity, your first car, your first apartment and first house, giving birth to your first child - all of these and more are transitional moments in your life where you pass from one stage of being to a new one. And literature is especially good at zooming in and magnifying those moments to find the drama and meaning in them.   
  
**Questions for discussion:**  
Start with the questions posed by the title. Where has Connie been (in her life)? Where is she going now? What makes this a coming of age story?   
  
Do you detect any irony in name of our antagonist? (Irony is figurative language that says one thing while meaning its opposite). Arnold Friend is anything but a friend. Take the "r's" out of his name and you get "an old fiend".   
  
Do you see Friend as being a symbolic character? The Devil? The violent side of American male identity? Death personified? Is he a projection of Connie's repressed desires for fast cars, loose morals, rock and roll, cruising, sexual liberation?   
  
Why does Connie submit to Arnold Friend? Does she have any choice in the matter? Is Oates making a thematic point here, as in, Connie must enter the world of adulthood, sexual maturity, even the threatening world of male dominated society, no matter what? Is her leaving a sacrifice? A selfless act to protect her family from certain death?  
  
In what ways was Connie "asking for it"? Is it fair to accuse the victim of culpability in her own seduction?    
  
There are many patterns of imagery worth noting. Look for descriptions of breath and breathing, of musical atmosphere, or ever present flies, of dreaminess.   
  
Oates even offers some fascinating puzzles for us to ponder. What is the meaning of Arnold's numeric code on the car door? 33 19 17. Got a bible? Work your way backwards in the Old Testament to the 33rd book, 19th chapter, and 17th verse. Then read the story surrounding that verse and look for thematic links. Another interpretation is based on Connie's age of 15. Is she the next number in line?   
Why is the story dedicated to Bob Dylan? (It's All Over Now, Baby Blue has been mentioned by Oates as an inspirational source). What role did Dylan's music play in the early and mid 60's? What was Dylan tapping into in songs such as "Hard Rain", "Mr. Tambourine Man", "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" and "Like a Rolling Stone"?