

Developing an Interpretation

Look for motifs-- repeated images.

Look for progressions-- ways in which the characters or settings change.

Look for oppositions-- characters, settings, or plot points that contrast.

Look for messages-- what an author is trying to show about the world and human nature.

Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Discussion Questions

1. Oates has said that she was inspired to write this story by Bob Dylan's song, "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue." She even dedicates the story to him. Find the lyrics to the song and read them. Can you see any connections?
2. Why did Oates choose the title "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Why is the title a question?
3. How would you describe Connie's relationship with her mother, sister, and father? What is "missing" from the family? And why does Connie wish "her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over?"
4. What is the significance of the name of Arnold Friend? What clues in the story tell us that he is not Connie's friend-- that he has violent intentions? In what way does he resemble common evil threats, like Satan?
5. How is religion represented in this story? Are there any symbols, characters, allusions, or language that signifies a specific type of religion or different kind of religion?
6. Why does Connie go with Arnold and Ellie? Why can't she resist him? Is she flawed in some way? Is it her own fault, or is Oates critiquing society for not giving Connie the tools to protect herself?
7. This story is laced with allusions or references to folktales and fairy tales. Arnold's "coach," for instance, has a pumpkin on it. He has big teeth (like a big bad wolf, perhaps?). Find other examples of allusions to fairytales. What are such fairy tales about? Is this story a fairy tale, too?
8. Arnold tells Connie that she will protect her family from harm if she comes with him. How important is that information in winning her over to his will?
9. Arnold asks Connie, "What else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?" In what sense might this be true?
10. Oates has written that at the end of the story, Connie is a hero. Why would Oates say this? Does this change the nature of the ending or the meaning of the story itself?
11. This story is dedicated to Bob Dylan. Why?