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Hitchcock and Oates: Building Suspense in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” has been analyzed in terms of music, use of space, use of foreshadowing, characterization of victim, characterization of villain, and its ambiguous ending. Authors seem to clash on which of these ideas are the most important. I propose that all of these ideas are literary devices being used to create a suspenseful tale, which is similar to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. That is not to say that Oates intentionally imitates Hitchcock, but the tools they use to make the audience feel suspense bear a striking resemblance to one another. By analyzing “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” in terms of Alfred Hitchcock’s films, one can get a better understanding of the suspense built in the story.

To begin with, both Oates and Hitchcock make prominent use of foreshadowing in their opening scenes to create in the audience an anticipation of danger that lasts throughout the story. In *Vertigo*, the very first scene begins with a black screen and racing minor key string music. The black screen fades in on a metal bar and two sweaty hands quickly reach up and grab it. There is a metallic clinking sound, and as the camera zooms out a man’s face appears. The viewer can see he is scaling a fire escape ladder to a rooftop, and he is being chased by a police officer and Detective John Ferguson. The subject of the chase leaps to the next roof. The officer follows close behind. He barely makes the jump, but manages to scramble up the sloping roof of the next

building. Ferguson is not so lucky. He hits the roof and slides down clawing the shingles for something to hold only to grab the gutter and the last moment. It bows downward with the weight. He looks down and the ground seems to move farther away. The officer comes to help, but bends too far and falls to the pavement below. The scene ends and cuts to Ferguson recovering months later and going about his day as usual.

The suspended imagery in this scene (i.e. the ladder, the rooftop, the gutter, and the fall of the officer) set the viewer up for two of the most important scenes later in the movie. About halfway through, Ferguson unsuccessfully tries to chase the woman he loves up the winding stairs of an old bell tower to keep her from killing herself. He finds himself unable to reach the top and save her because of the vertigo he developed as a result of the prior incident. In the end the suspicious Ferguson forces a woman to climb up the stairs of the same bell tower and—after an intense monologue in which she reveals to Ferguson that she is the same woman he thinks is dead—she is startled by something, falls out the window, and actually dies.

In a similar way, Joyce Carol Oates uses the first three paragraphs of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” to discreetly outline the plot of her story. The very first line, “Her name was Connie,” is written in past tense, which hints at the idea that Connie is dead. She is also concerned about her looks (25,26,27,30,31), which makes her the perfect target for seduction by flattery. Arnold Friend picks up on this right away (“You’re cute...Don’tcha believe me, or what?”[32]). The second half of the first paragraph points out that the victim suspects her mother of having “a shadowy vision” of her; that she is “always after Connie.” Already the language has indicated to the reader that Connie is a victim (25).

Also in the first three paragraphs the author shows the strained state of Connie’s relationships within her family. She feels as though her mother is jealous of her, she is jealous of

the respect and privileges granted to her older sister, and her father never talks to anyone else in the family. Connie seems to resent him for not sticking up for her. The text indicates this by stating that “around his bent head Connie’s mother kept picking at her...” (26). The separation felt by Connie leads to her physically distancing herself later in the story by staying home while the rest of the family goes to a barbecue.

The same sentence that informs the reader of Connie’s resentment towards her father makes an important point in foreshadowing by stating, “Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over” (26). Because the word “dead” is used two times and the statement ends with “it was all over,” the point is far too strong to be forgotten by the reader. This indicates that the death wish is an important problem that must be solved by the end of the story. Solution by reconciliation would be unsatisfying in context of the ominous language used in the previous paragraphs, so the only possible solution is death.

The story continues by drawing attention to what Joyce M. Wegs calls Connie’s “moral poverty.” Wegs points out that Connie typically spends her evenings making a “grotesquely parodied religious pilgrimage” to a drive-in restaurant which is “a grotesque parody of a church” (100). Similarly, in *Psycho* Hitchcock leads his first victim to the slaughter in a scene underscoring her “moral poverty.” Entrusted by her boss with the duty of making a large cash deposit to the bank, Marion Crane tells him that she is making the deposit and then heading home for the day because she is sick. Instead she decides to keep the money and skip town. She ends up at the Bates motel.

Here again is a similarity in the introduction to the villain. Bates appears to be a charming enough man at first glance, but there is something strange in his demeanor. After inviting Marion to supper, he has a disturbing argument with Mother. During supper, Marion tries to suggest that

Bates should seek help for Mother. The suggestion arouses in him a suspicious defensiveness leaving the audience to wonder whether the Bates motel is a safe place.

In the same way, Connie first sees Arnold Friend at the location associated with her transgression: the restaurant. He too is attractive, but suspicious. Even at first glance, Friend gives the reader a chill. Connie seems to notice him with a start, and his face is only a few feet away. It feels as though he has been following Connie at an uncomfortably close distance and absorbing every detail he can. He is pictured with black hair which suggests that he is a dark character, and his gold convertible reminds the reader of the golden arrows used by Cupid to make people fall in love. Furthermore, the reader knows that Connie is somewhat aware of his intentions because she scowls at him to show that she is not interested. The unwelcome glance has no effect on Friend's confidence, and he slyly responds by making an X in the air and simply stating, "Gonna get you, baby." This whole exchange happens without Connie's date even noticing, informing the reader that Friend is discreet and effective (28).

After the authors have characterized the victims in their respective stories, they must isolate the victim before the villain strikes. The emotional distance that the victim has put between herself and her acquaintances leads to the victim physically distancing herself from all the people who would otherwise be in a position to protect her. In *Psycho*, the isolation has already taken place by the time Marion meets Norman Bates. By taking the money and skipping town, Marion has decided that her future is more important than integrity and her working relationship with her boss. Another Hitchcock character, Alice, also distances herself from would-be protectors in a film called *Blackmail*. Alice White has decided that she is tired of her boyfriend. She is supposed to go out on a date with him, but has simultaneously made plans with

another man, so she distances herself by acting so cold towards her boyfriend that he leaves before dinner is over.

In “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Connie distances herself from her family because she feels that being around them restricts her self-expression. As the author stated earlier in the story, “Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home” (27). The “home” side of Connie is the side that tries to keep her mother from picking on her. It is the side that Connie uses as a façade to show her mother there is a distinction between herself and other girls her mother despises (28). The “anywhere that [is] not home” side doesn’t have to worry about what her mother thinks. This side has all the privileges of an older girl and that doesn’t need her father to protect her from her mother. By choosing not to go to a barbecue with her family (at the expense of her safety), Connie is able to find the distance she needs to express the “anywhere that [is] not home” side of her personality.

Unfortunately, withdrawal is often an invitation to trouble. Alice in *Blackmail* does not realize that the other man she has made plans with is potentially dangerous; Marion has not only isolated herself with a killer at a motel in a remote location, but she has agreed to have supper with him. Like the victims of Hitchcock who unknowingly agree to a date with death, Connie naively and innocently invites Friend by giving him the desired response. Instead of being suspicious of the strange car coming up the driveway and taking precautions such as locking the door, Connie nervously fixes her hair and goes to the door to greet Arnold Friend. She may not sound pleased with him at first because he is a stranger showing up unannounced, but her body language gives her away. Flattered, she “smirk[s] and let[s] her hair fall loose over one shoulder” when he offers her a ride. “She pretend[s] to fidget” when he tells her she’s cute (32). Then she stays at the door and continues the conversation by asking about the words on his car (33).

The story continues to build towards the dramatic incident by describing the villain in further detail. In *Blackmail*, Mr. Crewe (the villain) is, oddly enough, wearing more makeup than the other male actors. He appears to be painted or fake. There is a conversation outside the door in which Mr. Crewe invites Alice to see the inside of his flat. It starts in a friendly manner and then becomes almost uncomfortable to watch as he insists that she should go inside with him. Nevertheless, Alice agrees and follows him up to his art studio where they paint a picture together. Alice begins by painting a face and Crewe helps her to “complete the masterpiece” by guiding Alice’s hand in the painting of a nude female body to go with the face, and then she signs the picture. Feminist film critic and USC English professor Tania Modleski suggests in *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* that, with her signature, Alice authorizes Crewe’s view of her and the silence of her own idea (20).

Like Crewe, Arnold Friend appears to be painted. Like Norman Bates who dresses up like his mother, Friend is in costume. His shoes are stuffed, he is wearing what appears to be a wig, and he is masquerading as an eighteen-year-old. Like Mr. Crewe, he extends what would sound like a friendly invitation on the surface level, but refuses to take no for an answer, which makes the audience suspicious. Also like Mr. Crewe, Arnold Friend gives Connie a new definition of herself. First he tells her that she’s cute and he asserts his position by saying, “Don’tcha believe me, or what?” Then Friend tells her what her opinion of radio personality Bobby King should be by insisting that he’s not just “kind of great” as stated by Connie, but definitively “*great*” and that “he knows where the action is” (32,33). Friend is sure that everything he says is the truth, even down to the fact that he is Connie’s lover, and she just doesn’t know it yet (40).

Another item important to both Oates and Hitchcock is music. In the studio scene in *Blackmail* just before the attempted rape Mr. Crewe uses a song called “Miss Up-to-Date” to get Alice to change into a revealing outfit, then turns around when she is finished and says, “And that’s a song about you, my dear.” Friend uses music in a very similar way to lure Connie, who could also be referred to as “Miss Up-to-Date” with the way she is always checking her appearance (Oates 25, 27, 31). One critic has gone so far as to say, “Friend understands that music is sexual currency” (Urbanski 77). Friend brings up the radio almost immediately as a point of conversation (32), and it keeps playing in the background as part of his disguise (37, 39). He even steals words from pop songs to lure Connie out of the house (42).

The climactic moment in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is Connie’s scream. In one paragraph packed with emotion she runs to the back room stumbling over furniture and picks up the phone but is “too weak” to dial for help, and she screams into the receiver. Her spastic breathing is like “something Arnold Friend [is] stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness,” which is an ambiguous phrase that leaves the reader wondering if Friend has entered the house and is raping Connie or if the author is just trying to tell the reader that Connie’s breathing was painful as a result of the terror caused by Friend (45). Friend promises earlier in the story not to enter unless Connie picks up the phone (42). In this paragraph Connie has broken that rule. By such violation she has given Arnold Friend what would appear to him as open invitation to the house, so there could be a violent interaction taking place. Connie also does not speak at all after the scream, which could suggest that the phrase “stabbing ...again and again” is literal and she has in fact been stabbed repeatedly with a knife and is dead or dying. Her shirt is wet, which could mean that she is bloody from being stabbed. It could also mean that Arnold’s body fluids are on her clothes and/or that her shirt has somehow gotten wet

with blood from the breaking of her hymen. On the other hand, she may just be so afraid that she is sweating profusely. The author leaves the reader to fill in the gap here by never explicitly stating any of these things (46).

Like Connie's scream, Marion's takes place when she is stabbed (although this stabbing is obviously literal) again and again in the legendary shower scene. The "Mother" side of Norman Bates' personality will not allow him to feel sexual attraction, so Bates associates sex with violence just like Friend who makes his violent tendencies known by his threatening tone.

Hitchcock ends *Psycho* with a curious monologue by Norman Bates, and ends *Blackmail* with the reconciliation of Alice to her boyfriend followed by her suspiciously looking around as though someone is still coming after her. Like Hitchcock, Oates leaves the reader with an ambiguous ending. All Oates clearly says is that Connie leaves the house, and the rest of the ending is left up to the reader to determine based on assumptions and what the author has revealed about the characters. In the end, although all the questions presented in the beginning of the story have been answered, the audience is left speculating about specifics, and, of course, wondering what happens next.

## Works Cited

- Blackmail*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Anny Ondra, John Longden and Sara Allgood. British International Pictures, 1929. DVD. The seduction in this film is very similar to the seduction of Connie in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" The seducer is abrasive, uses music to achieve his goals including a song called "Miss Up-to-Date," and he wears more make-up than any of the other male characters in the film.
- Modleski, Tania. *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1988. Print. Analysis of Hitchcock from feminist standpoint. Includes the formation of the female victim's character by the male seducer (Blackmail). Use of song "Miss Up-to-Date" in Blackmail to seduce victim (obsession w/ fashion). Ambiguous implications for women.
- Oates, Joyce C. "'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 25-48. Print. Oates builds suspense in a manner similar to Hitchcock in her short story. The victim and villain, the foreshadowing, the sexual nature of the crime, the climactic moment of the scream, and many other devices are very similar.
- Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by Joseph Stefano. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Vera Miles, John Gavin, Martin Balsam, John McIntire. Paramount, 1960. DVD. The suspense created by foreshadowing, characterization of villain and victim, scream, victim's isolation, sexual nature of the crime, the space in which it happens, and the ambiguous ending are all very similar between "WAYG" and this film.

Urbanski, Marie MO. "Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"" *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"*

Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 75-79. Print.

Talks about music in "WAYG"

*Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Kim Novak. Universal, 1958. DVD.

Hitchcock uses audio, visual, and storytelling for foreshadowing.

Wegs, Joyce M. "'Don't You Know Who I Am?' The Grotesque in Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"" 1975. *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 99-107. Print. Wegs points out some details of "WAYG" that make it feel suspenseful and horrific.