

Student

HUMA 101

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Keeping Time: Examining Musical Pacing in The Writing of Joyce Carol Oates

To complete a character arc, a writer must interweave details, themes, and motifs so that by the story's end, the reader not only sees the character's journey, but feels that the progression is just. In the 1960's short story "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" Joyce Carol Oates develops her protagonist through music, choosing very specific auditory details and connections to songs in a way that signals a shift in the character's awareness and interpretation of the world around her. Like a metronome keeps time for a musician, Oates creates an undercurrent of music and sounds that set the pace for Connie's transition from having a naive world view to one of experience.

When Connie is away from home in the beginning of the piece, she walks in a way "to make anyone think she [is] hearing music in her head" (1). From her walk to the sound of her bracelet "jingling on [her] thin [wrist]," every aspect of Connie's world away revolves around sounds, a soundtrack of sorts for a world she lives in her head. When she leaves a burger joint with a boy, Connie's face is "gleaming with a joy that had nothing to do with Eddie or even this place; it might have been the music." Oates sets a specific tone with all of the musical references and Connie's visceral reactions to them, projecting the disconnect Connie has with the real world around her. When she daydreams of boys and love, she compares her experiences with the "way it was in movies and promised in songs," showing her lack of context for real love (2).

Once Arnold Friend invades Connie's reality, Oates uses the presence of music to show a shift in the protagonist's perception of the world around her. Arnold speaks "in a fast bright monotone" and his voice interweaves with "the same program that was playing inside the house" (3). Oates blends the tone of the perpetrator with the radio to subtly signal a shift of Connie's awareness of reality. As Arnold continues to talk to Connie, "he [speaks] in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song" (4), almost as if he is tapping into Connie's own rhythm, a device that soon betrays him when the reality of his experience doesn't mesh up with his effort to exist in Connie's imagined world:

She recognized most things about him...that sleepy dreamy smile that all the boys used to get across ideas they didn't want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the singsong way he talked...and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come together.

(5)

The more Connie is aware of the false image Arnold uses to manipulate her, the more she is aware of the reality she is facing, the reality that "everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was only half real" (6).

Further into the story, Oates describes Arnold's voice as one with "a slight rhythmic lilt" and his words as "the echo of a song from last year." This shift of past tense signals Connie's transition into an awareness of reality verses a life lived through current pop culture. As Oates leads to the climatic ending and Connie's transition into a state of reality, Arnold's voice becomes "rapid and meaningless" to Connie (8). While Oates constructs his words in a very lyrical manner, Connie is more aware of the actual sounds around her, Arnold's voice sounding more like "part of an incantation" than of a song (9). The transition is complete, and much to her

misfortune, Connie is tuned in to what is happening in reality instead of what she dreams an encounter with a man might be like.

Joyce Carol Oates dedicated this short story to musician Bob Dylan, using his image and lyrics to inspire the character of Arnold Friend, but her overall use of music and auditory details to pace the character development of Connie is a deeper reflection of the musical influence present in this piece of writing.

Work Cited

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?" *Epoch*, 1966, pp. 1–9.,
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