



## Self-Destructive Forces in Oates' Women

Neslihan Guler Ugur<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>BA-Bogazici University, English Language and Literature, 2005; MA-Istanbul University, American Culture and Literature, 2012. Kadir Has University, Turkey.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

This article aims to explore the self-destructive characteristic traits of women and the unconscious motives behind them in the short story *Where Have You Been, Where Are You Going* by Joyce Carol Oates. In this respect, Connie's masochism as opposed to men's sadism is explored thoroughly within the framework of psychoanalytic approach. The study explains how women turn out to be masochistic people in order to let their hidden and repressed selves free and get recognition from men. Moreover, self-guilt, passivity, and complete submission in Oates' women are analyzed with the reasons that generate them. The roles mothers and society have on the formation of these characteristic traits are studied within the context of Connie's relationship with her mother because it is her mother who always criticizes Connie because of her "trashy dreams". Finally, considering women's sexuality as a sin that deserves punishment, and rape as a sexual punishment for women who demand sexual freedom in patriarchal world order is one of the essential points discussed in this paper.

**Key words:** Joyce Carol Oates; Connie; Masochism; Women; Self-guilt; Psychoanalysis

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A very widely known short story *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* by Joyce Carol Oates, is one of the best representations of a teenage girl's entrapment between the expectations of the self and her family which are in contradiction with each other. It is the story of Connie, who is a beautiful and flirtatious girl, enjoying adolescent sexuality with boys. She is fifteen years old and she yearns for sexual freedom which she can savor only away from home. Unfortunately, Connie's sexual passion leads her to encounter the ambiguous character Arnold Friend. He is to turn the child Connie into the adult Connie; this is indeed what Connie has been looking for. However, the implications in the story and Oates' inspiration for Arnold Friend show that Connie will be raped and killed by Arnold.

The moment Arnold Friend and Connie first see each other, the way they address and treat one another other is very revealing because, over time, it turns out to be a master-slave relationship, in which Connie submits to Arnold Friend's orders without questioning him. Moreover, it is as if she obeys what Arnold says like a child is listening to her father in an obeying manner. During Arnold's unexpected visit to Connie's home, the characters Connie and Arnold symbolize the roles women and men have in patriarchy.

At the end of the story, Connie leaves her home and walks towards Arnold; it is emphasized that Connie is going with him. On the other hand, it depends on the reader's imagination and point of view where they are going and what is awaiting Connie there. The most common belief is that Connie will be raped and killed by Arnold Friend due to Oates' implication of Arnold as a serial sex murderer, who killed and raped girls.

On the other hand, it is left unexplained why Connie submits to a stranger so quickly and easily. One possible answer is that Connie submits because Arnold threatens her by telling "you don't want your people in any trouble, do you?" (Oates, 1994, p. 45), which means if

she doesn't do what Arnold says, Arnold will harm her family. Therefore, she gives in and goes with Arnold to prevent any possible harm to her family; however, this is not a satisfactory answer. It is highly possible that behind Connie's passivity and subjection to Arnold lie more powerful, unconscious motives. This paper explores psychological and unconscious motives behind women's self-destructive traits and their results in the story.

## MASOCHIST WOMEN AND SADIST MEN

There is no doubt that it is a masochistic behavior unquestioningly obeying a person who is going to hurt you and prevent you from seeing your family again. What Arnold tells her has sexual implications because he claims that he is always very nice at first, which signifies Connie's virginity, and afterwards, he will go inside her and "Connie will give her". Connie who had been confused about Arnold's plans up to that point could understand that he is planning to rape her through what he says. Consequently, knowing this fact and agreeing to accompany him proves that Connie has her share of masochism as a woman.

Concerning features of males and females, Juliet Mitchell has argued that dreams about violence have different significations for girls and boys. Take the case of a dream in which, a child is being beaten. Girls analyze it that way; firstly it is a sister or a brother that is beaten by the father. This is the sadistic phase, and it signifies jealousy and emerges from the attachment to the mother. On the other hand, in the second phase, girls perceive it as "I am being beaten by my father" this phase signifies a sense of guilt, the call for punishment, and masochism. This sense of guilt stems from girls' sexual desire for the father. The second phase is always unconscious and it signifies the oedipal attachment to the father. Therefore, girls feel guilty and need to be punished. The sadism in the first phase turns into masochism in the second phase. Mitchell maintains that "it expresses the wish to submit to castration, copulation or childbirth and to get erotic pleasure out of painful experience" (Mitchell, 2000, p.114). Boys get rid of the oedipal attachment to the mother by identifying themselves later with the fathers; however, girls' oedipal attachment to the father makes them feel guilty by birth. Therefore, boys turn out to be sadists whereas girls tend to be masochists.

One of the essential motives for women's masochism or the pleasure that women get from pain is explained by Jessica Benjamin. She notes: "the desire for submission represents a peculiar transposition of the desire for recognition" (Benjamin, 1988, p.56). One of the most striking points in the story which has already been discussed is Connie's divided personality. Apart from Connie known by people, she also has a hidden personality, which she partly reveals when she is outside

with her friends, enjoying freedom and boys' company. It is also obvious that, her "trashy dreams" are where her hidden self resides peacefully, yet she is alone and isolated there. She needs somebody to recognize and approve the hidden self. The need to let her hidden self free and get rid of the false self drives Connie to masochism as Benjamin notes:

Masochism can be seen, therefore, not only as a strategy for escaping aloneness, but also as a search for aloneness with the other: by letting the other remain in control, the masochist hopes to find a safe, open space in which to abandon the protective false self and allow the nascent, hidden self to emerge (Benjamin, 1988, p.73).

Such an analysis is indicative of the ambiguity in Connie's passive obedience to Arnold. When she is with Arnold, she is again in a dilemma; she is extremely fearful of him as a stranger, but also hopeful for the possibility of attaining the sexual freedom she has sought. Unconsciously, she feels that going away with Arnold means leaving the family, home, and most importantly, being freed from the suppression of her mother. By escaping from her home, she escapes from the sense of aloneness, brought about by her repressed self, and she perceives Arnold as an opportunity which will enable her to annihilate her false self and absolve the hidden self.

Moreover, Connie was always scolded because of her rebellion against the stereotyped role expected from women, so she lacks the approval and acceptance of the people around her. In other words, she needs an atmosphere where people will provide her with the recognition of her hidden self. Similar to what Benjamin says about women, Connie seeks for recognition of her true self by the others, so that she can attain an authentic self. As Benjamin argues masochism is a desire to be discovered; in contrast, sadism is driven by the desire to discover, to get outside and penetrate into someone else's reality (Benjamin, 1988). Taking all these into consideration, it can be concluded that Arnold personifies the sadist who seeks to discover Connie, and Connie embodies the oppressed self, that looks for discovery and recognition of the true self. As a result, Connie's conscious fear and terror felt at that moment are beaten by her unconscious desires for recognition.

The roles mothers have concerning women's masochism and men's sadism are quite potent. Benjamin says, in terms of mutual recognition of each person by the other in a relationship, mothers willingly provide their children with recognition; however, they don't expect the children to recognize them. As a result, girls who continue to identify themselves with their mothers recognize men without being recognized. As for men, they deny the other (women) rather than denying themselves. This explains masculine sadism and feminine masochism. Moreover, identification with mother leads girls to sacrifice their independence and perceive men's desires as theirs. Therefore, girls are not familiar with the power to assert

independence because their role models, mothers do not have that power, either. In addition, both the desire for sexual dominance and sexual submission signify the need for wholeness. It is obvious that men can achieve wholeness by sexual dominance, while women do so by sexual submission (Benjamin, 1988).

The lack of a means to attain independence for girls is explanatory as regards the reason why Connie cannot succeed in forming an independent self. It is what mothers are deprived of, so each new generation grows up without such a foundation in the development of their personality. In this way, Connie unconsciously expects to release her hidden self or construct a whole and unified identity for herself through submission to Arnold.

Except for the sadistic and masochistic relation between Connie and Arnold, Arnold's mystic power of knowing everything and his father-like attitude towards Connie also connote Arnold's superiority over Connie.

It is as if Arnold owns magical power because though he is a stranger, he knows Connie's name, her family members, and friends. Moreover, he is informed of the family barbecue, who has attended it, what Connie's sister is wearing at the barbecue and so on. As opposed to Connie who knows nothing about Arnold, Arnold has a higher status because of his unlimited knowledge about Connie. Furthermore, his superiority over Connie is like a reflection of the father as the head of the family. Arnold calls Connie "honey" and "my sweet, little blue-eyed girl", as if he is the authority, like a father. Moreover, it is also interesting to note:

Connie's quick submission to Friend reveals her attitude towards masculine authority. Invited to take a ride, Connie asks, "Where?"- to which Friend responds, "Where, what?" when she answers as if already under his command "Where are we going?", Friend's psychic invasion has begun (Daly, 1994, p.151).

Psychologically, Connie feels obliged to accompany Arnold to the place he wants to take her. It is a psychological motive because physically there is nothing forcing her to obey. At the very least, she could refuse his request; she has already agreed to go, as if it were an order. Now she is curious and anxious about where they are going as the title of the story indicates.

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## PASSIVITY AND JEALOUSY

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Apart from the depiction of women as sadistic, another feature that is portrayed as feminine is jealousy. As discussed earlier, the mother feels jealous of Connie because of her beauty, her longing for freedom, and her sexual demands. Moreover, the way that Connie underestimates June also implicitly signifies jealousy since June is always favored by the mother. Schulz and Rockwood argue that Connie's ambiguous relationship with June represents an "unresolved oedipal conflict, aggravated by sibling rivalry" (Gillis, 1994, p.120). Moreover, sisterly love between June and Connie is not

mentioned in the book. Jealousy resulting from rivalry is always a major constituent of women's relationships; even the closest family ties are not strong enough to eliminate such feelings. Additionally, apart from the jealousy between Connie, her mother and her sister, the narration reveals that Connie's mother and her sisters are also not sincere to each other. Showalter analyses the ties between the women in the story that way:

...sisterhood is no more powerful than motherhood. Bonds between women are weak and superficial. Connie's girlfriends are scarcely important enough to be named. When they go out together, it is not to be together but to escape from their parents and to find boys. In the world of the story, women cannot group together for mutual support, but only gang up against a third, (Showalter, 1994, p.16)

When the mother and the aunts talk on the phone, two sisters complain about another sister, but when the third sister calls, they complain about the other. It is evident that not only the sisterhood between Connie and June but also the ties between the mother and the aunts are weak. Moreover, this demonstrates that women's discontent does not target at one certain woman; in contrast, it is a trait that is common to all women regardless of their relationship. Concerning this, Millett claims, "a witty experiment by Philip Goldberg proves that everyone knows that having internalized the disesteem in which they are held, women despise both themselves and each other" (Millett, 1970, p.55). Here, Millett touches on the issue of women's internalization and belief of the dominant, patriarchal view of females. This self-deprecation is what lies behind their hatred, rivalry, and jealousy towards other women.

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## WOMEN'S UNCONSCIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO PATRIARCHY

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It is indeed thought provoking that not only men but also women serve and contribute to the patriarchal system of the world. Chodorow points out in this regard that "... women's motherhood and mothering role seem to be the most important features in accounting for the secondary status of women" (Chodorow, 1989, p.46). She means that mothers' attitudes towards children contribute to the development of an unconscious feeling of inferiority for girls, as opposed to mastery in boys. This again emerges from the fact that mothers identify themselves with their daughters, yet they encourage the boys to put an end to the identification with their mother. A boy who grows up in such an atmosphere, undoubtedly, feels superior to girls. As for the girls, they internalize the role offered to them by their mother; they are trained to be passive women, and later mothers. These concepts are embedded in the unconscious of the girls within the family context by the mother who represents the salient parent (Chodorow, 1989).

In addition to Chodorow, Jessica Benjamin also agrees that the roles of men and women are like a master and slave, respectively; the basis for such an idea is founded

by the mother's renunciation of her own demands, giving up her subjectivity for the sake of the male's annihilation of the commonalities with the mother (Benjamin, 1988). As a result, mothers themselves expect the same passivity from their daughters, while they expect activity from their sons.

As argued earlier, boys dissociate themselves from their mothers and seek identification with their fathers. This allows sons to annihilate any feminine attributes inherited from attachment to their mother. As a result, boys are purified of all the aspects of womanhood, and they are trained to be masters. In contrast, girls are not provided with such dissociation; therefore, they are trained to be like mothers. They imitate their role models with all the negative characteristics intended for women and internalize these over time. They do not realize how they turn out to perceive themselves as subordinate to men because of this unconscious process which occurs in childhood. As Jung explains, in particular, young girls and boys are driven strongly by their unconscious desires because they have just emerged from an unconscious state. That is, they have not developed a complete understanding of themselves, so it is the unconscious drives to a great extent that motivate their behavior. Moreover, he argues that there are unconscious motives that emerge from the parental influence as well (Jung, 2003). If the claims of Chodorow and Benjamin are combined with what Jung says, we could claim that young boys and girls are mostly under the control of parental codes in their unconscious and lead their lives accordingly.

Moreover, women's acceptance and internalization of this secondary role is a powerful factor as Carolyn Heilburn illustrates with a comparison between women and Arabs, ...women had differed from Arabs in one important way: for more than Arabs internalized the Western view, women have internalized the male view of themselves, have accepted it as the "truth", as Arabs rarely accepted...the Western view of their ineptitudes and essential inhumanity (Heilburn, 1994, p.26).

Indeed, such a comparison evidently demonstrates how people try to define others with negations and consider themselves as having the right to label people with such depreciatory terms. The Western mind did consider the Arabs to be inhuman. In a parallel way, patriarchal minds define women as passive due to their sexes. On the other hand, women do not reject to this definition as much as the Arabs have objected to the Western people. Undoubtedly, what Heilburn expects from women is that they should define themselves and not submit to the definitions given by men which perpetuate this oppression.

These issues can elucidate why Connie's mother struggles to keep Connie away from her trashy dreams, expresses her great satisfaction of June, and disapproves of Connie's rebellion. It is because she has been trained to believe so. Moreover, it again clarifies why June accepts the secondary status of women, and why Connie hesitates to get rid of the role of oppressed womanhood.

## RESULTS OF CONNIE'S DESIRE FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM

It is a universally accepted fact that the teenage years constitute a challenging period. It is especially a period in which people become drawn to the opposite sex in terms of sexual matters and, in turn, begin to grow distant from their parents. At the age of seventeen, Connie is such a teenager, and she is filled with "trashy dreams". Throughout the narration, the reader is exposed to Connie's search of freedom in terms of sexuality. She and her friend frequently go to the malls and restaurants where older boys are and she always looks around invitingly to entice boys.

In a patriarchal world, it is common to blame women for their sexual encounters with men and regard such events as cause of rape and murder. As Millett argues, The Pandora myth and the tale of Adam and Eve are two striking examples in this respect. She points out that these are Western archetypes that are based on the idea of blaming women for their sexuality and as a result, they are perceived as being well-deserving of punishment for this primal sin. She maintains that the Bible defines knowledge as contact with the phallus and, the loss of Eden stems from Eve's contact with the snake which signifies a phallus. Therefore, this tale implies that all the sorrows of life are the results of women's sexuality, just as Eden was lost because of Eve's sexuality (Millett, 1970). Indeed, Connie's fate is similar to Eve's, in which her contact with sexuality is thought to be inviting Arnold and death.

What makes the reader think so is the fact that the mother continuously complains about Connie's behavior, as Showalter points out what the mother is doing "...condemning Connie's trashy values, and boy craziness, and blaming the debased adolescent culture of her world for her susceptibility to the fatal seduction" (Showalter, 1994, p.9). When she is out with Eddie in his car, Connie cannot stop herself from looking around at other boys, besides the narration suggests that Connie has orgasm when she is with boys or dreams of boys. When she is with Arnold, she is sexually aroused: "the wave of dizziness, the sweating, panting, and shaking all characterize a woman well on the way to orgasm" (Gretchen & Rockwood, 1994, p.126). Therefore, her interaction with men, even when she is danger, makes her feel sexually attracted.

Indeed, in **Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?**, "Oates sets up the framework of a religious allegory-the seduction of Eve" (Urbanski, 1994, p.75). The story of Eve seducing Adam parallels to the situation between Connie and Arnold in the following way; it has been already mentioned that when Connie is out with Eddie, she cannot help but look around charmingly, taking deep breaths with pleasure. At that moment, she glances at a boy in a convertible jalopy. After winking at him, she glances back again. This is the moment when Connie seduces Arnold with her sexually inviting manners.

Moreover, the way her chest rises and falls as she breaths just before Arnold arrives, is like a call for him. Therefore, Connie seduces Arnold with her smile as Eve seduces Adam with the apple. Furthermore, after she meets Arnold at her house, she remembers that moment and Arnold. Surprisingly enough, Connie's reaction to Arnold's questions are not meant to stop him. In contrast, theirs is a dialogue; it is as if Connie encourages Arnold to keep the conversation going. During the dialogue, she smiles and lets her hair fall loose over the shoulder, signifying sexuality. Furthermore, she is quite curious about him, so she asks questions to him encouragingly.

Such examples could be invoked to defend the belief that women are to blame for the violence to which they can be subject. As Rich claims, "Connie is punished for sex with sex. Connie is singled out for rape because she is guilty of being pretty and flirtatious. She was asking for it, wasn't she" (Rich, 1994, p.142). Therefore, rape and murder can be interpreted as caused by Connie's self-guilt.

Undoubtedly, rape as the result of self-guilt, that "bad girls" feel is not what the message that Oates wants to convey, rather the story emphasizes the fact that sexuality is viewed as the right of men, and that it does not fit in the gender roles of women in patriarchy. Diana Scully points out that, rapists are not always held to blame in cases of rape. She specifically means that any behavior by the victim that contradicts socially expected gender roles can be considered as a provocation for rape. Furthermore, the way a woman dresses and social evaluation are important factors for a decision of who is to blame in a case of rape. Scully mentions a real case in which a murderer blames a female victim by saying that she tempted him by wearing sexy dresses, not wearing bras, or revealing her legs when she was getting out of a car (Scully, 1990).

In my view, when all these discussions are taken into consideration, it is seen that, in this patriarchal world order, as a woman, one is not privileged to object to her family, to look for freedom, especially sexual freedom, or to act in a contradictory manner; if a woman does rebel in these ways it is her destiny to be punished by rape or murder because the patriarchal world system makes people foolishly think that "a virtuous woman either cannot get raped or does not get into situations that leave her open to assault" (Brownmiller, 2000, p.260).

It is for sure that the intended messages by Joyce Carol Oates may not match what the reader thinks about the story. The following is what Oates thinks about Connie:

Connie is shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, doomed-but capable nonetheless of an unexpected gesture of heroism at the story's end. Her smooth-talking seducer, who cannot lie, promises her that her family will be unharmed if she gives herself to him: and so she does. The story ends abruptly at the point of her "crossing over". We don't know the nature of her sacrifice, only that she is generous enough to make it (p. 68).

As a reconsideration of Connie's analysis and Oates's comments on her, it is possible to assert that the story

ends with the image of fallen heroine because Connie is brave enough to object to her gender role and also brave enough to sacrifice herself to protect her family. The cause of considering the end of the narrative as her fall is her punishment for her courageous acts that result with rape and murder.

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