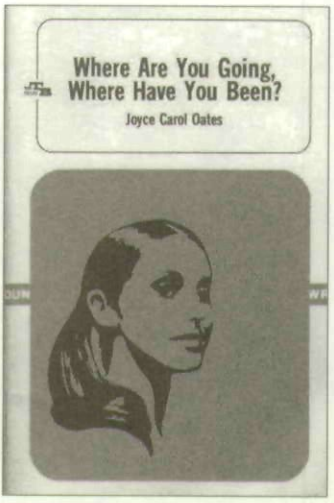
Riding in Cars with Boys: Reconsidering **Smooth Talk**



Originally published in 1969 and frequently anthologized in contemporary short story collections aimed at high school and university students, Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" continues to attract significant critical interest from literary scholars. Most of these scholars are intent on reading past the author's evocatively realistic portrait of a self-absorbed teenager, Connie, who is lured to almost certain sexual violation and death by the at once seductive and menacing Arnold Friend, in order to unpack, among other things, the story's fairy-tale hermeneutics, its allegorical allusions, or its intertextual references.[1] Not so Joyce Chopra's film adaptation of the story, *Smooth Talk*, which garnered widespread acclaim upon its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 1986 (it won the Grand Jury Prize and generated significant buzz for Laura Dern in the role of Connie), only to run afoul, in subsequent years, of feminist film critics who critiqued Chopra for ignoring the story's symbolic register in favor of depicting an admonitory and moralistic "coming-of-age story" that serves as a "didactic pronouncement about the perils of promiscuity" (Sumner 96).[2] I am sympathetic, to a degree, with such an analysis, as I believe that Chopra, in translating Oates's story to film, is unable to convey fully the story's literal and figurative "doubleness," particularly in terms of a conclusion that the author herself has declared "impossible to transfigure into film" (Oates, *[Woman] Writer* 321). However, I also find it curious, as someone who has successfully taught both texts on more than one occasion, that Chopra's film, which was released on DVD in 2004, has not attracted more attention from scholars of adaptation studies and gender studies alike, particularly for the ways in which its reception highlights our continued investments in fidelity criticism as an analytic framework that at once exposes and occludes the narrative/aesthetic *and* the ideological mechanisms that subtend the processes of genre recognition and gender identification across different media.

This essay seeks to remedy that critical oversight. In it, I attempt to reconcile what several reviewers have identified as the generic cross-purposes of the film—especially apparent in its supposedly muddled denouement—in terms of a close reading of Chopra's use of metonymy both at the level of montage and *mise-en-scène*, imagetrack and soundtrack. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate that lurking

beneath the surface of Chopra's filmic portrait of "a girl who flirts with danger and lives to regret it" (Sumner 89) is a psychological study as complex as Oates's in its symbolic investigation of the overlapping and frequently competing sex and death drives structuring Connie's behavior. Indeed, I will be suggesting that a re-interpretation of Connie—and especially her ambivalent role within and without her family—through a classic Freudian analytic framework paradoxically helps to redress some of the critical misperceptions about the film's intentions. Bringing out how Connie's doubled drives in turn drive the film's narrative means paying attention, I argue, not just to the climactic car ride Connie takes with Arnold in his souped-up gold convertible, but to those she accepts from other male figures as well.

Commenting on *Smooth Talk* shortly after it was released, Oates highlights the impossible representational task faced by Chopra and screenwriter Tom Cole: that, in choosing to depict Connie's story on film within the predominantly realist generic conventions of family romance/coming-of-age melodrama, they would necessarily forfeit the allegorical reading of her protagonist as a figure of vanity or innocence, transforming her instead into a representative adolescent girl, whose relationships with her friends and "boy trouble" inevitably cause conflict with her immediate authority figures, her parents (Oates, *[Woman] Writer* 318-19). In emphasizing this aspect of the original story, the film is, I think, remarkably successful, with supplementary expository scenes during the first half of the film visually and aurally embellishing for the viewer what Oates refers to in her story as the "two-sidedness" of Connie, that is, how she is away from home with her friends, and how she is at home with her family (Oates, "Where" 13). In the case of the former, we have the opening credit sequence, which documents the frantic scramble by Connie, Jill (Sara Inglis), and Laura (Margaret Welsh) to get from the beach they are visiting illicitly to a pre-arranged rendezvous with Laura's mother at the mall; a prolonged staging of the mall scene only sketched by Oates in her story; not one but two visits to Frank's Diner, the second of which results in Connie, having gotten carried away with Eddie (David Berridge) in an underground parking lot, walking home alone; and, finally, the arrival of Jill at Connie's house to warn her that Arnold (Treat Williams) has been asking after her.

This latter scene provides a bridge between the exciting world of Connie's friends and what she perceives to be the staid existence of her family—and it is no accident, in this regard, that it is Jill, the more cautious and reticent of Connie's girlfriends (in earlier scenes we see her trepidation about sharing the front seat with the driver of the half-ton that stops to offer the girls a ride home from the beach, her refusal to attend the movie favored by the "eighteen-year-old" boys whom the girls had been shadowing at the mall, and her contempt for the idea of crossing the highway to check out Frank's Diner), who should be the one to effect the link between these two worlds and the opposed female spirits/spirited females who dominate them. To this end, as soon as Jill arrives at the Wyatt homestead both

Connie and her mother are quick to vie for her favor, with Mrs. Wyatt (Mary Kay Place)—vexed yet again by the wayward obstinacy of her daughter—asking Jill if she would mind trading places with Connie, and Connie whisking Jill off to the family dining room in order to extract whatever information she has to impart about "the guy" who has been asking after her. Before Jill can properly convey her warning about Arnold, Connie jumps up to put James Taylor's "Handy Man" on the stereo, enjoining Jill to dance with her. Jill rebuffs Connie, but in a series of swift and economical cross cuts between Connie's self-absorbed dancing in the dining room and her mother's wistful and contemplative swaying to the same music in the adjoining kitchen, Chopra's film establishes a genealogy of female desire as it is both enabled and constrained by domestic space (the unfinished house, in this regard, and Connie's mother's attempts to stay on top of the work, becomes an apt metaphor for her own unfinished life), a visual and aural metonymy that will be repeated later on in the coda to the film, when Connie plays the same song again and dances with her sister, June (a scene to which I will return).

In this and other scenes of Connie's home life, we have depicted in Chopra's film a particularly fine elaboration of the strained relationship between Connie and her mother, especially what Oates describes in her story as their "pretense of exasperation" with each other ("Where" 15) wonderfully foregrounded in successive domestic confrontations during the first half of the film: over Connie's selfishness and "trashy daydreams" (a phrase lifted verbatim from Oates's story ["Where" 12]) in Connie's bedroom when she fails to return from the mall with the paint roller and pan her mother asked her to buy; over Connie's idleness and vanity at the breakfast table the next morning; over Connie's unresponsiveness when her mother attempts to bond with her while the two are painting the house; and finally over Connie's backtalk, when, in response to rumors Mrs. Wyatt has heard about her daughter fooling around with boys, Connie suggests that it is somewhat hypocritical of her mother to lecture her about morals when she herself became pregnant (with Connie's older sister, June) as a teenager. This proves the final straw for Mrs. Wyatt, who rewards Connie's temerity with a slap to the face, a physical blow that ostensibly serves as the motivation for Connie's fateful decision not to accompany her family to the barbecue at her aunt's. During these and other scenes at the Wyatt home, June (Elizabeth Berridge) and Connie's seemingly oblivious father (Levon Helm) are frequently present, alternately goading or placating, taking sides or remaining neutral, depending on the nature and stakes of the quarrel between mother and younger daughter. Each also shares important scenes alone with Connie, scenes which, I would argue, contribute to a symbolic reading of the film, and to which I will turn in due course.

Taken together, these scenes seem to suggest a familiar generic pattern, one that leads us to expect a certain kind of narrative climax and denouement, in which a minor conflict—like Connie staying out too late, or falling in love with a boy from the wrong side of the tracks—is eventually resolved, and all is put right within the Wyatt household. At a certain point in Chopra's film, however, that familiar narrative seems to get away from both Connie, as character, and us as viewers. Not surprisingly, this generic (and tonal) shift coincides with the arrival of Arnold at Connie's literal doorstep, announcing in chillingly mock-romantic tones the precise

nature of his intended seduction of the terrified teenager through the flimsy screen door she has barricaded herself behind. With this image, Chopra is quite clearly invoking cinematic codes more associated with the horror/slasher film than with the coming-of-age melodrama and, arguably, from this point on the mixed auditory and visual signals that *Smooth Talk* sends out to its audience (from the menacing orchestral music that begins to swell on the soundtrack whenever Arnold is on screen to a classic deep focus shot of Connie, in the foreground, huddled with the telephone in the hallway, and Arnold, in the background, lounging threateningly in the front door frame) bring with them equally mixed moral messages, or cultural codes, relating to the representation of adolescent female sexuality. As horror aficionado Randy puts it at one point in *Scream*, Wes Craven's parodic treatise on the genre, the heroine of such movies survives only if she remains a virgin. This double standard in part explains B. Ruby Rich's indictment of the second half of Chopra's film:

> The music surges on the soundtrack. It isn't long before the high-spirited Connie is a quivering puddle on the hallway floor [...]. *Smooth Talk* softens up its audience with lust and flirtation, then slices through its gut with a knife of horror. It turns into a familiar product, the stock-in-trade of the horror genre: woman alone, trapped in empty house, terrorized, raped or killed or left insane. In Chopra's hand, the knife has a twist: Connie is punished for sex with sex. (345)

Yet, in Chopra's defense, I think it is important to point out that the image of Connie cowering in the hallway by the telephone that both Rich and I reference, and which is of a piece with similar iconic images in slasher films ranging from *Halloween* to *Scream*, is actually drawn directly from Oates's original short story, itself thoroughly steeped in the cultural codes—including that of violence against women—that are "the stock-in-trade of the horror genre":

> [...] she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried out for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend were stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house. ("Where" 29)

In other words, textual fidelity, often strategically invoked by feminist critics (myself included) to decry the violence done to women's texts when they are adapted and radically altered for the screen by male directors,[3] is here turned against a female director, (mis)read as a sign of the non-equivalence between her gender politics and her filmic aesthetics.

To be sure, questions of fidelity become largely moot when we compare the endings of Oates's story and Chopra's film. Oates wisely chooses to leave the ultimate horror faced by Connie to the reader's imagination by having it happen

off-stage (or off the page). We are left, instead, with a final image of Connie, now transformed into a spectator of her own drama, walking through the screen door and into the unknown fate that awaits her: "She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were safe back somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited" (31). In the film, I would argue, we register all the more powerfully the significance of Connie's crossing of the threshold of the screen door—and of Arnold convincing her to do it "all by [herself]" (Oates, "Where" 30)—in part because we have seen Connie hesitate doing so from the other side in previous scenes, lingering on the porch and eavesdropping on her family (whom she clearly feels disconnected from yet somehow still longs to rejoin) at least twice before upon returning home from nights out with her friends. The screen door, as a *symbolic* representation of the boundary between the world of childhood innocence represented by Connie's family and their ramshackle house and the world of experience represented by Arnold and his flashy car, between an interior space of female embodiment and its psychic invasion by an exterior masculine consciousness,[4] is expressly thematized by Chopra when, during the aforementioned scene, it *literally* splits the screen between Arnold and Connie.

Unlike Oates, however, Chopra shows us what happens to Connie after she crosses this boundary. First, Connie is framed in tight close-up as she walks toward Arnold's car. Chopra then cuts to a long shot of Connie and Arnold driving down the highway. She jumps back briefly to shots of Ellie Oscar (Geoff Hoyle), Arnold's creepy sidekick, wandering through the Wyatt house, and ends with a slow pan across a bucolic sunlit field, focusing and eventually fading on a still shot of the front of Arnold's golden Pontiac gleaming in the foreground. But the startling compositional beauty of the way Chopra has framed this last shot is interrupted once again by the soundtrack, with both the sinister extradiegetic orchestral music associated with Arnold and the pulsating diegetic pop music emanating from Ellie's radio serving to link the parallel cuts that constitute Chopra's visual telescoping of Connie's double violation. That is, the shots of Ellie invading and defiling successive rooms in Connie's house—particularly her bedroom, where he dismissively flips through her record collection—are meant to stand in for the rape that Arnold is presumably performing just beyond the edge of the frame in the shots of the field with which they are cross cut. As the screen Arnold puts it to Connie just as they are about to leave, "Let's leave Ellie here [...]. He can stay here and guard your Daddy's house for you, so no harm will come to it when you're out with your lover on a Sunday drive." The reference to Connie's father is significant, as I will shortly demonstrate.

Choosing to represent, however cryptically, what in Oates's story is only very ambiguously inferred means that Chopra, in the final minutes of her film, must work quickly to recuperate Connie's experience in a way that fits with the audience's previous interpellation of her within the framework of the family melodrama. This

process begins soon after Arnold deposits Connie at the foot of her driveway; having started to walk wordlessly toward her house, Connie returns to the car to warn Arnold never to come around again. She then appears to make amends in turn with the various members of her family, who have just returned from their outing, first telling her father that she now regrets not going to the barbecue, then hugging her remorseful mother, and finally dancing with her sister in her bedroom. This closing tableau of Connie explicitly seeking the comfort and embrace of another woman after her exposure to male sexual violence (at one point Connie asks June if she would feel "defiled" by touching her) strikes a note of expressly feminine reconciliation that, as I have indicated, sits uneasily with several feminist critics who have decried the physical and moral price Connie must pay for reintegration within the bourgeois domestic sphere of cinematic realism.

But what happens if we suspend, for just a moment, a realist interpretation of this scene, and, indeed, of the film as a whole? For, it strikes me that critics who abjure Chopra and the conventional narrative mode of cinematic representation in which she is working for failing to capture the allegorical complexity of Oates's story and, concomitantly, for upholding an equally conventional reading of gender and sexuality, have themselves been seduced by the inherent conservatism of the medium. That is, even at a meta-critical level, and even when applied to predominantly non-realist genres, cinema operates under the general premise that we believe what we see and, perhaps more to the point, we see what we believe. But what no critic of Chopra's film to my knowledge has yet pointed out is that its concluding sequence expressly asks us to doubt what we *have not seen*. This in turn, I would argue, invites us to reread the entire film on a more symbolical level, one that in fact preserves aspects of the psychological doubleness at work in Oates's story.

Let us return, then, to Connie's bedroom, where we left her and June. In response to her older sister's query about "what happened today," Connie starts to recount the episode with Arnold as we think we know it: "This man [...] he came and asked me for a ride. And I went." When June expresses shock, Connie immediately begins to revise her story, first equivocating about whether she went or not, then joking about her sanity, before finally denying anything happened at all: "Maybe I didn't go. Maybe I'm going out of my mind [...] Listen, I didn't go [...] It didn't even happen." Connie then gets up and turns on her tape deck, and the soft strains of James Taylor's "Handy Man" fill the room. Connie asks June to dance with her; June accepts, and the two sisters shuffle awkwardly but affectionately together as the screen gradually fades to black. But not before Connie asks of her sister: "Do you still like this song?" Directed as much at the viewer as at June, the question should remind us that we too have heard the song before, specifically during the scene when Jill comes to warn Connie about Arnold and pointedly *refuses* Connie's entreaty to dance with her. Pop music's romantic confections, in both Oates's story (which is dedicated to Bob Dylan) and Chopra's film, fuel Connie's ideas of love, as well as help define the spatial parameters in which those ideas might play out. In the film, for example, as soon as Connie's family leaves for the barbecue, she rushes from room to room in the house tuning every radio to the same Top 40 program, a move that can be interpreted as a fateful summoning of her Sunday

suitor, Arnold, as Ellie's radio ends up being tuned to the same station. To this end, Chopra is careful to reproduce on film the scene in Oates's story where Connie, drying her hair in the sun and dreaming about "the way [love] was in movies and promised in songs," awakens, just prior to Arnold's arrival, feeling disoriented: "[...] when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was [...]. She shook her head as if to get awake" (Oates, "Where" 16).

This motif of waking from an afternoon nap, as if from a dream, is in fact established at the very outset of the film. During the opening credit sequence, we see Connie and Laura and Jill, having overslept while playing hooky at the beach, rushing—tape deck in tow—to get back to the mall where they are due to meet Laura's mom, with Taylor's "Limousine Driver" this time serving as extradiegetic musical accompaniment. And leading us, full circle, back to Connie's bedroom. It is thence that Connie repairs as soon as she is dropped off by Laura's mother, sweeping past her own mother, who is at work sanding the stairs, in order to barricade herself in her bedroom, adorned with posters of James Dean and other Hollywood icons, to dance with abandon to another song she likes. However, Mrs. Wyatt interrupts her daughter's revels and, upon discovering that Connie has in fact forgotten the paint pan and rollers she asked her to buy, issues her aforementioned Sybilline pronouncement about the price Connie will pay for her self-absorption: "I look into your eyes and all I see are trashy daydreams." As if to underscore the fairytale allusions at work in this opening sequence, Chopra then cuts to a chastened but still petulant Connie walking through the family apple orchard, at one point reaching up and plucking a piece of fruit from a tree. This is an image we should all be adept at reading, and one whose symbolic associations should complicate any straightforward realist interpretation of the film. For with it Chopra firmly situates her narrative within a classic allegorical aesthetic tradition that takes as one of its central preoccupations the charting of an individual's movement from innocence into experience, or ignorance into knowledge (including sexual knowledge), as well as the higher price that women, historically, have had to pay for that movement—in art as in life. Thus, when, at the end of the film, Connie asks of her sister, June, whether or not she *still* likes the James Taylor song they are dancing to, she is tapping into a doubled temporality that governs not only the dreamlike sequences with which Chopra bookends her film but also the nightmare journey that Connie undertakes in between.

This brings us to the crucial issue of the particular mode of transportation by which this journey is facilitated. Several critics have noted the importance of automobiles in both Oates's story and Chopra's film, that Connie, for example, "is always at the mercy of men who will come with a vehicle to take her away, to take her somewhere else" (Showalter 17), and that a car's "mobility is equated with sexual freedom for Connie" (Sumner 93-94). But few have actually tracked the various narrative and symbolic patterns established by the successive car rides Connie accepts from men in the film, nor made any serious attempt to link those patterns to a larger meta-analysis of female psycho-sexual development that Chopra might be embedding beneath the realist representations of her film. And yet, surely this is what we are invited to do from the opening sequence of the film, when Connie and her girlfriends accept a lift from an older man in a pick-up, a car ride

that is bracketed syntagmatically by the driver's leering invitation to Jill to play him some tunes and his equally knowing thanking of all the girls, once he drops them off, for sharing their music with him. During this first car ride, Connie is crucially distanced from her friends via her position in the back of the pick-up. We clearly see her thrilling to the open air and the speed, raising her arms and whooping as the pick-up crosses a bridge, the first of several threshold images (including the road that separates the mall from Frank's Diner, the aforementioned screen door that separates Connie from Arnold, and so on) that recur throughout the film, all of which Connie will eventually cross.

Not long after this scene, following the debacle of the family dinner of tuna salad, Connie lingers outside the Wyatt house with her father, colluding in part over the fact that they are both in the doghouse with Mrs. Wyatt. Gazing at the stars, Connie sighs: "I can't wait till I'm old enough to drive." The car, which at this point Connie must rely on others to both provide and drive, is the literal means of escape from what she sees as the impossibly staid and dull existence of her suburban mom. But, as importantly, the car, as a ubiquitous symbol of sexual desire and fulfillment in North American pop culture, and when viewed explicitly through the lens of Freudian drive theory, binds Connie, in her primary narcissistic, or Oedipal, phase of ego formation, to her father, toward whom her id is instinctually, or unconsciously, channeling its libidinal energy.[5] Indeed, my argument for a more complex, psychological reading of Chopra's film rests, fundamentally, on the fact that each of the four ensuing rides Connie accepts in cars driven by men (I am purposefully excluding from this analysis the rides she takes in cars that are driven by the mothers of Laura or Jill) can be read as a stage in Connie's "object-cathexis," that is, what Freud would describe as the transferring of her libido from her father onto an external love object, which, through the necessary work of sublimation, succeeds in strengthening the ego, but which also, in giving birth to the super-ego, puts the sex drive on a possible collision course with the death drive (see Freud, *The Ego* 55-59).[6]

We see the start of this process in Connie's encounter with Jeff (William Ragsdale), the first of the boys she meets at Frank's Diner. Together they drive to a cliff-top lookout, where Connie repeats her longing to escape; but this time flight via an automobile is very explicitly associated with sex, as after uttering this line she leans in for a kiss with Jeff. However, death is never far away, for just prior to her departure from the restaurant with Jeff, Connie (unwittingly to her at the time) first encounters Arnold in the parking lot. Leaning against his car, he stops her short by saying "I'm watching you," then points his finger at her and makes a mysterious figure-eight sign in the air. This alerts us to the fact that from this point on, the car rides that Connie takes with men are going to be increasingly dangerous for her, both in terms of the potential consequences if she acts on her desires and, as importantly, if she does not act on those of her male companions. This is certainly the case with Eddie, the second of the boys Connie meets at Frank's, and with whom she ends up making out in an underground parking lot. There are no lovely vistas here, only anonymous concrete, and Eddie has only one thing on his mind. His almost-seduction of Connie—who tells him to stop because she is enjoying it too much—is one of the most erotically charged scenes in the film, and while he chivalrously accedes to Connie's sublimation of the goals of her

"object-libido" within those of her "ego-libido" (Freud, *Beyond* 59-60), thereby allowing her to preserve her virtue, the threat of sexual violence again frames the whole encounter. In particular, back at Frank's Diner, prior to going parking, Eddie threatens, only half-jokingly it appears, to give Connie "a fat lip" if she does not behave herself. And then on the long walk home after her date with Eddie, and Laura's parents' discovery of what the girls have been up to, Connie is passed on the road by a group of rowdy boys in a Mustang, who clearly hurl some offensive sexual taunts at her.

However, of even greater importance, I would argue, is the fact that Connie's second visit to Frank's Diner, and her subsequent sexual encounter with Eddie, are preceded by her nervous declaration to Laura that she may have seen her father drive by just as they were crossing the highway to go to the hamburger joint. As Freud writes of the special prohibitive nature of the super-ego in *The Ego and the Id*, it "retains the character of the father, while the more powerful the Oedipus complex was and the more rapidly it succumbed to repression [...] the stricter the domination of the super-ego over the ego later on—in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt" (34-35). Sure enough, the next car ride Connie takes in the film, and the one that immediately precedes her climactic journey with Arnold, is with her father. Following her fight with her mother the next morning, Mr. Wyatt asks Connie to accompany him to the store to get charcoal briquettes for the barbecue at Aunt Tillie's. Connie complains that she is still in her nightgown, but her father persuades her that she will not have to get out of the car. This detail is important, because symbolically it associates Connie with the dream-like space of sleep, or the fuzzy, disorienting realm of not-quite-waking. Just as important psychologically and imagistically, the representation of this child-woman (at once a little girl still in her nightie and a fully developed sexual being who should perhaps be more discreet in covering herself up) sharing the front seat of the car with her father inextricably links Connie's sexuality with her still in flux object-relations within the Wyatt family romance. In this regard, we get confirmation in this scene that Connie's father did in fact see her crossing the road to Frank's the night before, information that the two become complicit in keeping from Connie's mother. Viewed within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis, what we are witnessing here is Connie's struggle, during the latency period of her psychosexual development, to cathect herself from her father, transferring her primary identification to another love-object, and internalizing within her emergent super-ego the future force of his possible displeasure with her (see Freud, *The Ego* 29-31 and ff). Indeed, Oates herself has commented that one of the things she liked best about Chopra's adaptation was the subtext of "Connie's ambiguous relationship with her affable, somewhat mysterious father" that the director succeeded in bringing out from the story: "I had thought, subsequent to the story's publication, that I should have built up the father, suggesting, as subtly as I could, an attraction there paralleling the attraction Connie feels for her seducer, Arnold Friend" (*[Woman] Writer* 319).

And it is, of course, Arnold who steps into the emotional and psychological void consequent to this transitional phase in Connie's development, when her ego defenses are not yet fully formed and she is wont to confuse the competing pulls of the sex and death drives as each attempts to gain control of her libido. The car

ride with her father still fresh in both Connie's and viewers' imaginations, Arnold's unexpected arrival in his own wheels of fortune intrudes upon our respective unconscious desires. Love-object or agent of destruction? Friend or foe? We, like Connie, are initially unable to read the screen Arnold's intentions (especially as charmingly played by Treat Williams) in part because cinema operates on the same pleasure principle as the id, mitigating to a degree any reaction formations we may erect to counter its seductive and soporific effects. Chopra, I would argue, is aware of this. When Connie gets in the car with Arnold, we go with her. When the camera comes to rest on the shiny grille of Arnold's car parked in the sunlit field described above, we cannot look away. And it is my contention that the film, in necessarily inviting us to project onto this scene an image of the very real sexual violence that is presumably occurring off-screen, is also projecting, through the image of the car—at once a love machine and a death-mobile—its own quasi-allegorization of the psychological violence that attends the dissolution of the Oedipus complex and the adolescent ego's consequent reorganization of its object-choices and identifications. As Arnold puts it to Connie in both the story and the film, "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it" (Oates, "Where" 29).

In this regard, let me return to the scene of family reconciliation with which the film ends, in particular to a closer reading of the nature of Connie's interaction with her father, and how this contrasts with the process of making up, in turn, with her mother and sister. Walking up the driveway to the house after having admonished Arnold to stay away from her family, Connie is careful to keep her distance (both physically and emotionally) from her father. In fact, their conversation takes place, significantly, with Mr. Wyatt standing in front of the open trunk of the family car. And while Connie at first tells him that she wished she had gone to the barbecue, she subsequently amends that statement to "No," before finally settling on "I don't know." This is followed by a tearful embrace with her remorseful mother, who apologizes for hitting her and tells Connie that she had been thinking about her all day. Finally, there is the poignant scene of rapprochement between the two sisters that concludes the film. Arguably this represents the final stage in Connie's object-cathexis, with her successfully repressing the Oedipus complex and the death instinct, locating within her father the admonitory and prohibitive "Thou shalt not" of a necessarily patriarchal super-ego, and transferring her primary object identifications and affective attachments to the women of her family.

Sex and death have long been among the most important organizing themes for Joyce Carol Oates's literary oeuvre, from early stories like "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" to mature novels like *Blonde* (2000). The latter is a fictionalized account of the life, loves, and death of Marilyn Monroe, who, as an archetypal figure of sacrificial femininity, shares many affinities with Connie. To this end, *Blonde* opens with Death, here personified as a bicycle messenger, making

a special delivery to Marilyn's home in Brentwood and ends with, among other things, a redaction of the fairy tale about the Dark Prince and the Beggar Maid (3-5, 732-34). Equally coincidentally, the novel was adapted as a television mini-series in 2001 under the direction of Joyce Chopra, who again received decidedly mixed reviews for how well she succeeded in representing the fantastical, non-realist elements of Oates's narrative style and content.[7] My argument in this essay has not been to elide or downplay the very real issues of sexual exploitation and violence against women with which both Oates and Chopra are representationally engaged as female artists. Rather, I have been concerned to show how a film that has been read as both a failed adaptation (in part because of its fidelity to the literalness of its source text) and a didactic betrayal of feminist principles (in part because of its frank portrayal of female sexuality) in fact yields—structurally, imagistically, acoustically—symbolical and psychological interpretations as complex and richly rewarding as the story upon which it is based, and what this says about the occlusions of gender and genre within cinematic identification more generally. We might say, then, that in the *drive* for critical consensus about what message this film sends to male and female viewers alike, the filmmaker's id collides with the critic's super-ego, sending Connie's ego for a very long ride indeed.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Kozikowski, who analyzes the story alongside Cinderella; Wilson-Jordan, who reads it as an initiation story; and Sutton, who traces the influence of Flannery O'Connor on Oates's writing. To be sure, several critics have also argued compellingly for a "purely realist" reading of the story. See, in this regard, Coulthard; and Rhode, who in a cogent student paper published online, puts the problem this way: "All the figurative interpretations [of 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'] may provide readers with wonderful side effects, but they should not obscure the direct literal meaning. It is through the word for word translation that Oates's true motive can be found: to begin to address the serious issues of rape and violence against women in today's society." Oates, who has acknowledged that the idea for the story was inspired in part by a *Life* magazine article she read about a real-life serial killer, has labeled her story "psychological realism" and "realistic allegory," which she has described as "Hawthornean, romantic, shading into parable" (*[Woman] Writer* 317).

[2] See, as well, Brenda O. Daly, who asks at the outset of her otherwise sympathetic analysis of the film, "Why [...] has yet another woman artist resurrected a take of violence against women?" (101); Elayne Rapping, who reads the film as an anti-Cinderella tale, arguing that it "resurrects a puritanical fear of female sexuality and the old good girl/bad girl dichotomy which uses that fear to keep women sexually repressed and at war with each other" (37); and B. Ruby Rich, who in labeling the film "insidious" and its director "a moralist" who has betrayed her early feminist documentary ideals (345), states that "*Smooth Talk* may be the first genuinely postfeminist movie [...]. [It] is a movie that means to teach teenage girls the perils of sex," delivering unto the audience "the spectacle of lust," and more particularly "the punishment of its female embodiment, again for audience pleasure" (344-45, 346). Rich's critique, originally published in the *Village Voice*, was written in partial response to a glowing review of the film by her colleague at the paper, Andrew Sarris; see his "Teenage Gothic."

[3] See, for example, Whitt, on *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*; and my own analysis in *Screening Gender, Framing Genre* (32-36) of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[4] On the representation of space in Oates's story and Chopra's film, and its links with body/consciousness, see Daly.

[5] Freud develops and elaborates his theory of the drives—or "instincts"—as they structure the unconscious and the ego in most sustained terms in the following four works: *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905); "On Narcissism" (1914); *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920); and *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

[6] While Marilyn C. Wesley has convincingly used Freudian theory to examine what she calls "the totality of Joyce Carol Oates's family fiction" (10), including "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" no one has yet done the same to Chopra's film.

[7] See James and Leonard for two contrasting opinions in this regard.

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