In Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Connie and her mother struggle to understand each other and accept each other the way they are. In Jane Flax’s article *The Conflict Between Nurturance and Autonomy In Mother-Daughter Relationships Within Feminism* she expresses, “My mother’s worst fantasy is that she will end up like her mother. My worst fantasy is that I will end up like my mother, and I know that as soon as I have that fantasy I am trapped” (171). This is a taste of what is going on between Connie and her mother. Connie wants to break free from her mother’s disapproving eyes which leads her to make the terrible and dangerous decision of leaving with Arnold Friend. The conflict and dysfunctional relationship with her mother as well as the constant insistence that Connie is not good enough is what causes her to fall into the trap that beauty is all that matters in the world.

Connie’s sister, Jane, “was so plain and chunky and steady that Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother’s sisters” (Oates 312). June is the “perfect” daughter Connie is considered useless besides her beauty. As her mother criticizes nearly everything she does, “Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything” (Oates 312).
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gives does not do anything to help her, it only reinforces the idea that beauty is the only good quality Connie feels she has.

Her mother constantly criticizes her not because the two are too different, but because they are too similar, or at one time they were. Connie’s mother was once beautiful and now has lost her beauty, she “hadn’t any reason to look at her own face” (Oates 312). In this way, Connie is a threat to her mother where June is not. Connie’s mother does not have to criticize June because she is not beautiful and thus not a threat. Connie however threatens her mother’s memory of her own beauty because she is beautiful. “Because women tend to identify more strongly with their girl children, more internal conflict is likely to be simulated by their role as mother” (Flax 174). Connie’s mother sees the beauty she lost in her second daughter and is jealous and internally conflicted by it. “If June’s name was mentioned her mother’s tone was approving, and if Connie’s name was mentioned it was disapproving” (Oates 315).

It is evident that despite the conflict and the jealousy between mother and daughter love is involved. “This did not really mean she disliked Connie and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June because she was prettier” (Oates 315). This passage does reflect back on the message of the importance of beauty that Connie’s mother is constantly reaffirming. Connie’s mother’s issues with beauty come from the fact that she is not beautiful anymore and her husband does not pay any attention to her anymore. Connie’s father, “didn’t bother talking much to them, but around his bent head Connie’s mother kept picking at her until Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over” (Oates 312). This is assuming that he used to pay attention to her when she was beautiful, then she became pregnant, lost her beauty, and now he is uninterested. “Rich argues for distinguishing, ‘two meanings of motherhood...the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to
children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control’ (Rich 1976, 292)” (DiQuinzio 10). The reason she continues to criticize Connie and not June is because Connie “took” her mother’s beauty and now she is resentful of it. “The mother will tend to be more conflicted about her girl infant’s movement toward differentiation and will be less likely to give her the loving push that facilitates movement out of the symbiotic orbit” (Flax 176).

The issue of the father not paying attention to the family also distresses Connie and causes her to act out against her mother. Connie sees her mother and how bitter she is over her loss of beauty and does not want to end up like her or her sister June. She sees that her father pays no attention to her mother and she does not want that to happen to her. This is why she goes out and flirts with a multitude of boys without telling her family. When Arnold Friend comes along he represents something unknown, dangerous, and altogether creepy. Connie, however, has a choice. She can stay in the kitchen until her family gets home-safely or she can choose to open the screen door and go with Arnold Friend into a terrifying and unknown world. If she stays in the kitchen she is under her mother’s protection as well as the protection of the domestic sphere the kitchen provides. In this short story the safety the domestic sphere provides woman is emphasized in the deal Arnold Friend makes Connie. Arnold Friend says, “I ain’t made plans for coming in that house where I don’t belong but just for you to come out to me, the way you should” (Oates 323). Connie has to stay in the kitchen and not use the phone in the other room otherwise Arnold Friend, who symbolizes a dangerous outside world, will come in.

She chooses the latter which signifies that she wants to break away from her mother’s control. Connie does not want to end up like her mother- unattractive to herself and to men. She
really does not want to go, but she is tired of always being compared to Jane. “Be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in? - and get away before her people come back?” (Oates 325). Connie already knows she is not perfect and the only thing she has of value is her beauty. This is why she gives into Arnold Friend and goes off with him because she knows that she will never be better and beauty is all she has. As Connie steps out of the domestic sphere her mother wishes to keep her in she was, “taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him - so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it” (Oates 326). The reader knows that Connie is making a dangerous decision because she will be raped and most likely murdered, but this passage makes Connie seem oddly at peace with her decision.

Before Connie makes the decision to go outside she is hysterically crying out of fear by the telephone, “A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house” (Oates 324). And, “She was hollow with what had been fear but what was now just an emptiness” (Oates 324-325).“She thought, I’m not going to see my mother again. She thought, I’m not going to sleep in my bed again” (Oates 325). Connie feels empty because this is the moment she realizes that the only thing she is worth is her beauty. It is a devastating realization for Connie because now she feels she has to give herself away in order to be free from her mother’s criticisms.

Clearly, the relationship between a mother and a daughter is very impactful upon both parties. These relationships are not always positive. They can be filled with jealousy, conflict, and sharp words that leave both mother and daughter feeling deflated. This type of mother-daughter conflict is shown in Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You
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Been?”. The constant criticisms of Connie’s mother have left her believing that the only trait she has of any worth is her beauty which leads her to make terrible decisions that put her in serious danger in the world and with men.

Works Cited


Comment [36]: Hi Caroline. I'm not entirely sure I get the point of your essay. No girl in her right mind would go with a man to be raped and murdered willingly just to escape her mother's criticism. There are many other ways she could escape them. She could run away, she could confront her mother, she could try to be more like June, etc. In addition, I'm not really seeing the feminist view. What does this all say about women, or men, and their interactions? You briefly mention the domestic sphere, maybe elaborate on that.

Comment [37]: Hi Caroline. Hope you can decipher the comments on the side - I just realized how cramped it's looking. You have an excellent first draft with your paper and you came to ideas with the mother/daughter relationship that I would never be able to think of. I think you have more room to expand/focus on this story's feminist qualities and theories. Maybe look at the domestic sphere and the absence of the father some more, how Connie might use her beauty as a tool over "boys" to seduce them to make her feel powerful, and when she comes to confront a "man" she's not sure how to react. I hope some of my ideas were helpful. I hate writer's block. Keep plugging away, your paper's coming along nicely!