# “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”: A Marxist Literary Criticism

It is possible to have differing social classes within a tightly-knit nuclear family. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”, as written by Joyce Oates, brings forth an understanding of class as presented by a piece of literature. Connie, the character whose life is the center of the story, appears to be or wanting to be part of a different social class as compared to her parents and elder sister June. This book is best suited for a Marxist criticism on literature as it presents an environment and characters that can clearly be matched to the author’s perception of social classes at the time it was published. Looking at "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" from a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, it can be seen that Joyce Oates, who was brought up in a relatively harsh economic environment, used family ties to show that different family members can conflict on the kind of social classes they live in and male chauvinism to show dominance in people of high social classes.

The Marxist Criticism of literary works is a form of criticism that enables readers understand works of literature beyond the stories that they present. As per the Marxist Literary Criticism, authors can present a social class view that reflects the kind of life that they live or relate to. Oates, for example, presents the life of a young girl, Connie, who thrives in an age where beauty is considered rich and expensive (Oates, 318). Her life in the book is elaborated through the presentation of a good and relaxed lifestyle, having fun with boys and meeting people with shiny vehicles. These illustrations depict a high social class. However, the author does not openly state the existence of classes in the society, but presents them as the story unfolds. It is up to the reader to critique a work of art and identify the presented classes. Secondly, we also understand that the society is highly divided into social classes that create a class mentality in individuals, including authors. As presented by Oates throughout her book, social classes are in existence. Therefore, in as much as authors may not be biased when writing books, they are partly motivated or influenced by the social class in which they lived, or one that they often desired. Thirdly, understanding a work of literature through a Marxist Literature Criticism enables one comprehend the kind of environment that the author was in when coming up with the ideas to pen down the literary work. For example, by reviewing Oates’ book, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”, it is possible to understand social classes of the time or that influenced the setting and theme of the story presented by the author.

The life of Oates, the author of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”, is a clear depiction of social classes and how they can influence the views of an author. Looking at the life Oates from a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, it can be seen that her childhood in a relatively poor family resulted in her presentation of characters in a way that befitted her social class. Oates, for example, studied in a one-roomed school at one point in her life as her parents could not afford to take her to a rich school (Oates & Lee, 33). Due to this kind of life, it is probable that Oates resented rich people. The result of this is the depiction of a suffering Connie. The suffering could have been put in place to punish Connie for wanting a rich life. Additionally, Oates’ presentation of Connie’s separation from her family when she needed them most can be related to Oates ended relationship between her and her grandmother. Oates lost her grandmother when she was young (Oates & Lee, 47). The two were in a very close relationship and she had supported her in her writing work. When she passed on, Oates was yet to become an established writer. Looking at the Marxist criticism, Oates felt that the rich who often look to get away from their poor family members should be punished. She, therefore, presents a suffering Connie who, even in the face of a stalker who has a shiny vehicle, probably ends up miserable and dead. From the book “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”, we get a clear understanding of Oates as a woman who seeks to present comfort in a low social class instead of a high and wealthy one. For example, she presents June, Connie’s sister, as living a life of achievement since she got a job and started to help out her family, unlike the Connie who always seeks to have fun with boys while looking at herself in the mirror. The reason for this depiction of June and Connie is due to the life of simplicity and probably contentment that Oates lived as a youngster, According to her, a high social class was not a source of happiness, but a source of misery (Oates & Lee, 22). The author, as understood in her biography, lived a simple life in which she and her family often struggled to make ends meet. Her social class was low as she lived in poverty when compared to other people who could afford going to good schools.

Viewing "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" from a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, it can be seen that Joyce Oates uses family ties to show that different family members can conflict on the kind of social classes they live in. For example, Connie, unlike her sister or mother, was fond of looking at herself in the mirror, or comparing her face with that of others to confirm that she was pretty and looked good (Oates, 318). According to this depiction of Connie, she seemed to position herself in a high social class whose concern was beauty and appearance unlike the simplicity that was seen in her sister June. According to Oates (318) also, there is a boundary that is developed in Connie’s family due to her prioritization of beauty over everything and everyone else. All that mattered to Connie was the fact that she was pretty, and she was well aware of it. This realization was so extreme that her relationship with her mother and sister weakened. Towards Connie’s suffering, her family had gone out without her, an indication that there was, indeed, a rift in the family relationship. Thirdly, the inability of Connie’s mother to fit in a social class that Connie could thrive in made Connie and her mother beauty rivals in their house. At one point, Oates notes that Connie’s mother was once pretty, but age had taken that beauty away and she felt less beautiful than Connie (Oates, 320). Therefore, it was probable that Connie’s mother always criticized Connie, and even afforded to go have family time with June only, because she felt a disconnect with Connie as caused in the difference between their social classes. From this book, also, we identify June as a plain lady, without the kind of sophistication associated with Connie. As such, she elicited praises from her mother and aunts unlike Connie (Oates, 300). This depiction indicates a praise for a simple and low social class and a form of hatred for a high social class associated with Connie. She never received any praises despite the fact that she was younger and prettier than June. From these examples, it is evident that family ties can be broken when family members associate with different social classes.

Viewing "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" from a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, it can be seen that Joyce Oates uses male chauvinism to show dominance in people of high social classes. Firstly, Connie is into boys, and likes to hang out with them. Hanging out with them makes her feel pretty (Oates, 321). However, the fact that these boys make her break house rules and stay out late simply because it makes her feel of a high social class implies that the male gender in a high social class misleads vulnerable ladies to the degradation of morals. Secondly, Connie is attracted by the seemingly expensive life of Arnold Friend, the man with a convertible that is golden in color (Oates, 340). This man’s lifestyle is the resemblance of a high social status, but he ends up causing misery to Connie. Towards the end of Oates’ book, Arnold appears to torment Connie in a manner that shows harassment and probably murder. Thirdly, Oates (318) also presents Connie’s father as one who rarely speaks to his daughters. However, on the occasion that Connie is harassed by Arnold, Oates states that June and her family were out for a barbecue. The hardworking man he was, he was of the simple social class associated with June, but not Connie’s expensive social class. Being a man, he was supposed to protect Connie, but instead left her vulnerable. Fourthly, Oates presents boys and men in Connie’s social class. However, it seems that they are not there to protect her when Arnold attacks. This is an indication that Connie, in the high social class that she wanted to place herself, was not welcome. She faced torment all by herself. Had she stuck to a low social class like the one associated with her sister, she would not have been Arnold’s target. To sum up male chauvinism, there appears to be dominance of the male gender in the high social class as presented by Oates, and these men take advantage of women who try to be part of this class.

## Conclusion

Looking at "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been" from a Marxist Literary Criticism perspective, it can be seen that Joyce Oates, who was brought up in a relatively harsh economic environment, used family ties to show that different family members can conflict on the kind of social classes they live in and male chauvinism to show dominance in people of high social classes. In summary, social classes, if realized differently in a family setting, can cause conflict and separation. Additionally, there is a probability of men in high social classes to assume a form of power that makes them harass women within or outside that class. Therefore, as long as families exist and have both men and women, it is critical to avoid conflicts within them as caused by social classes.

## Works cited

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism.* Routledge. 2003. Print

Oates, Joyce C, and Lee Milazzo. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. Print.

Oates, Joyce C. *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America*. Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1974. Print.