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## The Clash of Modernity and Humanity in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

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The rise of technology as a nemesis of humanity is one of the most evocative ideas in America's rapidly computerizing culture. Great fear thrives on the thought that these camps will insist on mutual exclusivity in an apocalyptic arena. In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Joyce Carol Oates engages the two in a power struggle to suggest that the warmth of humanity will ultimately become a sole source of identity in a cold, technical world. From the boisterous radio to the "roaring" telephone, technology is a harrowing fixture both within this story and modern reality. Although Connie formerly defines her identity by appearance and personality, she is abusively stripped of these qualities until her last stronghold of meaning resides solely in her human heartbeat.

Although Arnold is clearly human, his demeanor represents the contrary. He embodies technology as a foil to Connie's humanity. For example, Arnold makes use of "taps"(218), "numbers"(219), and "codes"(219) as a part of his communication style. This reduces communication to an impersonal exchange of information. In essence, Arnold seeks to program her with his symbols and knowledge. He wants to indoctrinate her as if inserting a computer chip. Technology engenders the value of time compression, but if humans become fatally attracted to this immediacy and simplicity, a violation of maturity is a grotesque possibility. Furthermore, Connie's "bright green blouse"(219) amidst Arnold's "tiny metallic world"(219) connotes that she is a young, fresh, and flexible human amidst his inorganic, technologically advanced environment. People provisionally define themselves by how they act and what they wear, but these concepts of humanity begin to deteriorate when modern environments force them to search inwardly for meaning.

Additionally, Arnold commodifies Connie as a "treat"(220). He classifies her as an object in order to dehumanize her. This classification sparks the shift in the locus of control. To begin, Connie was aggressively disgusted. But her emotional energy shrinks to confusion and then fear as her power drains to fuel Arnold's confidence and aggression. He feeds off of her life until she becomes submissive and obedient. This concern with power and control is central in forging identity and meaning. As Arnold further encroaches on Connie's existence, she becomes less capable of defining herself by her environment. Symptoms of dissociation and shock are the roots of repetition for the word "this" when describing her own house and body. As technology intrudes, people search for an increasingly internal, innate reason to cling to humanity.

One of the most poignant examples involved in the formation of meaning is Arnold tapping "one fist against the other"(223) to music. This

gesture is a haunting image that mirrors the continual beat of Connie's heart. It is troubling because it suggests he holds her heartbeat in his hands. The rhythm of Connie's heart in turn becomes a song. It also acts as a command or call, a drum invocation that softly lures a creature to its master. As the situation escalates, Connie begins profusely sweating until "her bright green blouse was all wet" (229). This is a universal human response to intense stress. But it is also a slow leaking of her fluid youth; her humanity evaporates away. Each pore in her body is releasing her essence; it is releasing a part of itself. At the very end, Arnold does drain her of humanity when she relinquishes her final post (her heart) as "nothing that was hers" (230). Arnold represents this triumph by displaying limp wrists which both signifies the end of Connie's heartbeat and her new lifeless disposition. The human heartbeat ceases when he opens his arms to her.

Holding and attributing meaning in the world is a human undertaking. It is a unique accomplishment of the individual mind. But when the mind falls under attack and artifacts of identity have disintegrated, all there is left to remind people that they are alive is the presence of a somatic human tick. Connie "felt her heart pounding" (230) and observed it one last time. Afterwards, as Arnold's command remained concrete, she suspended her constructed hope and reason. Her beating heart was the last piece of evidence that both she and her situation were real. All of this leads to dissociation from other defining factors and identifying herself as a heartbeat. The window of meaning closes inwardly towards the heart center as the badge of humanity. Technology has trailed the values of efficiency, callousness, and resolution into human life. But these emblems of modernity foster a growing sense of coldness in the world that is potentially lethal. The human condition, though wrought with weakness, represents freedom and life. Ultimately, Oates acknowledges the human condition by answering the universal "Why?" with, "Because we live".

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* 1996. Print.