Crafting a well-designed plot is critical to the success of a work of fiction. Without a strong plot, the piece becomes more of a character sketch and less of a story. In its simplest form, plot is predicated on the basic questions of What? How? and Why? First, what happened to the characters in the story, then how it happened, and finally why it happened. The answers to these questions could be simple, or they could be complex, depending on a writer’s preference. Add to that some basic human emotion — jealousy, love, betrayal — and a plot becomes even more nuanced.

Josip Novakovich explains it well in the book *Fiction Writer’s Workshop*: “Plot clearly depends on basic values. What do your characters treasure most? Put it at stake. Let them fight for it. Let them fight for life, love, money, jobs. If your characters care about nothing, the actions around them might become random. Without passion, forget about plot.”

**Elements of a Plot**

The traditional elements of plot are exposition, complications, climax, and resolution. Not every writer follows this format, but in order to deviate from a
SECTION 3

Plot

depending on a writer’s preference. Add to that some basic human emotion — jealousy, love, betrayal — and a plot becomes even more nuanced.

Josip Novakovich, Writer’s Workshop: “Introduce your characters through their actions or thoughts. Let them fight for it. The physical or emotional struggle of your characters could be your plot.”

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These values will help develop themes...
But also, how they act when put in a situation will help to develop theme as well.

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traditional plot structure it is important to understand how it works. Following are the major components of plot, with illustrations from Joyce Carol Oates’s short story *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* It is recommended that you read this short story to better understand the plot illustrations. The complete text of this story is available on *Celestial Timepiece*, an authorized Joyce Carol Oates website.

**Exposition**

Exposition is the backstory, or background, that establishes the character’s driving forces.

In Joyce Carol Oates’s *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, the first few pages establish a background for the main character and the plot. A description of the main character’s personality and physical traits are given, and the reader begins to understand that Connie is a young girl coming-of-age who desperately wants to be older. She is testing her sexuality and freedom, and the reader, armed with this background, can understand the future complications when they arise.

*Complications*

Often referred to as the “trouble” of a story, complications are introduced to add tension and to build to the climax.

In Joyce Carol Oates’s *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, the complications begin to take shape after Connie convinces her mother that she can stay home alone while the rest of the family goes to a barbecue. A strange car comes up the driveway and the driver, Arnold Friend, attempts to coerce Connie out to his car. The tone and dialogue between the two give the reader a sense that trouble is developing. Arnold poses a thinly veiled threat to Connie’s innocence. When Connie refuses to go with him, Arnold reveals that he knows way too much about the whereabouts of her family and when they will return. Connie threatens to call the police, and Arnold tells the young girl that if she touches the phone he will come in the house. The tension continues to mount as the stakes are raised over and over again.
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In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, after Connie’s boyfriend, Arnold, disappears, she stays home and waits for him to return. While he is getting a haircut, a barbershop owner, Mr. Flannery, asks about Connie and the disappearing Arnold. Mr. Flannery tells Connie out to be careful, as Arnold is known for his quick temper. The two girls become friends, and Connie tells Mr. Flannery about a young girl who had been involved with a young man named Tony. Mr. Flannery and Connie begin to develop a friendship, and Connie feels a sense of security and safety with him. The conflict... There can be many. We teach students to look for a MAIN conflict. It is usually the one that causes problems for what is VALUED... See earlier notes on plot and values.
The Climax is the point of the most intense conflict in a story, often marked by a critical moment of discovery, realization or change in the main character.

In Joyce Carol Oates’s *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, the climax takes place when Connie is faced with the choice of either going with Arnold willingly or facing violence from Arnold in her home, and the potential of violence to her family. Connie makes her decision.

Resolution takes place in the final moments of a story, when any unresolved problems are wrapped up and the conflict is contextualized, often reflected upon.

In Joyce Carol Oates’s *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, the resolution is bitter. Connie goes with Arnold knowing that violence is imminent. The moment represents her making her first truly adult decision, finally reaching that coming-of-age moment that she desired so badly in the beginning of the story. The reader gets a sense of irony from the story’s resolution, since Connie’s ultimate decision reflects the true nature of maturity, which is often marked with hard decisions, sacrifice, and consequences.
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Finalize how you are dealing with theme and decide what the story is really saying about life.