

Possible topics for “Do With Me What You Will” papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- This is probably the most formally inventive story we've read so far: it is told entirely in dialogue, without even tags to keep the characters straight. Analyze this technique in detail– how does Oates establish character without names, physical descriptions, or internal reflection? What effect does this technique have on how we perceive the story– does it seem cold, unengaged? Or intimate? What results might have Oates achieved using more conventional narrative techniques?

- The crime here would seem, at first blush, to be a brutal rape. But Oates is asking us to consider a second “crime,” a lawyer's manipulation of the justice system. This is one of many stories we've read that portray our social institutions to be flawed or morally bankrupt; compare several of them in an essay.

- Joyce Carol Oates was one of the first writers to effectively dramatize the feminist ideals that were becoming prominent in the sixties and seventies; consider this story first as a feminist polemic, and then try to show how its nuances transcend any simple political interpretation.

- This story does an excellent job manipulating our sympathies. The criminal, a confessed rapist, is portrayed as amiable, agreeable; we empathize with him as the lawyer condescends to him and twists his story. We appreciate the lawyer's intelligence, but are repulsed by the uses to which he is putting it. And even the victim, whose terror and helplessness are so palpable in the first two thirds of the story, comes under doubt as the lawyer casts her as a “probable prostitute.” Write about this and other stories (*The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*, *The Sour Lemon Score*, “The Comforts Of Home”) in terms of their ability to make us suspect goodness and sympathize with evil.

- The rapist in this story explains his crime by claiming that he was in a frenzy: “I got so excited”... “You know how you get”... “I was so high, you know.” While some of the crimes we've read about are premeditated, many occur in a moment of passion, a loss of control, a mad rage. Analyze these moments in the stories we've read. Perhaps do some outside research– what does it mean to “lose yourself”? Is our moral culpability for deeds committed in such a state equivalent to that for deeds we plan and consider? When does such a crazed state tip over into insanity? Is insanity a legitimate defense for crimes?

- Nobody comes off very well in this story– both characters are doing wrong, and neither is anyone we can really like. The same goes for O'Connor's characters: the angry Thomas, the lying Sarah, the weak and sentimental mother. Are these writers cynical? Do you long for some kind of hero– a person, like Holmes, whom we can admire? Compare these two approaches: why might a writer choose to, or choose not to, create characters we like and with whom we identify?

- This story might be a good jumping-off point for an essay about how law enforcement is portrayed in various crime stories. Here, we see the injudicious use of force as the mistake that will free a confessed rapist from prison. In other stories, we have seen cops as unimaginative and corrupt. What are these writers trying to say about the police– or, more generally, about human prospects for creating and maintaining order?