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## Short Story Analysis: Identity Beyond High School

In Joyce Carol Oates' short story "Life after High School", Zachary Graff, the protagonist faces a dilemma in 1959 where he tries to express himself freely yet in within the limits of a conservative society. Oates describes the main characters, Zachary and Sunny using clear specific details; she incorporates both verbal and dramatic irony. Oates uses different symbols in her story and includes a variety of elements which add a deeper insight into the plot and support a main theme she proposes: that one's inner self is hidden beneath a shield of labels that darkens their true love and desire. In "Life after High School", the protagonist undergoes a period of self identity and conflict between himself and society that urges a formative impact in his life.

Zachary befriends Sunny Burhman "an all-American girl too good to be true" (577) "She was not a religious fanatic, but she was a devout Christian."; "she had not the slightest doubt in Jesus Christ, that's to say His spirit, dwelled in her heart, and that simply by speaking the truth of what she believed, she could convince others."(576). She feels the need to constantly act "sunny" or else she does not deserve the name given to her. When Zachary commits suicide, a part of Sunny was lost; Zachary had opened her eyes to talk about the religious "obligations" of his parents and their expectations of him which eventually influence her to do the same. Zachary is first introduced as a flat character, he was very polite, antisocial and a conformist who wanted to please his father in several ways; Zachary played golf, he states " I have no natural talent for it, and I find in profoundly boring, but golf will be my game"(575) yet it isn't till the end of the story that we see different aspects of his character. His dilemma becomes serious to the point where he takes his life away yet his sexuality is not clear to Sunny until after he commits suicide. It isn't after Zachary and Sunny become friends that she "would examine her beliefs and question her faith which she had been born in, she had not done so by the age of seventeen and a half."(576)

Zachary's suicide had changed Sunny's life. "Zachary owned a plum-colored 1956 Plymouth which other boys envied". (578) The model of car symbolizes masculinity: what killed Zachary; the color purple was a symbol for him to express his identity. His car later becomes his coffin when they find Zachary lifeless in it, which represents the struggle and pain he had experienced being homosexual in 1959. The police find a Bible in Zachary's car along with "textbooks, gym shoes and a ten-foot length of clothesline."(583) Zachary was trying to live the typical teenage life but was lost between his identity- sexuality and religion. Zachary often discussed [his religious doubts] with his only friend Tobias. "He prayed every morning of his life, he prayed for his sinful soul, for his sinful thought, deeds, desires. (577) His thoughts of being gay and practising Christianity were causing him to be anxious. The expectations and standards of his conservative society pressured him and Tobias to stay closeted. "Sunny" was a symbol for Zachary; she was his golden ticket. Zachary's relationship with Sunny was a way for him to block signals of his identity- his homosexuality from peaking; he was struggling to be widely accepted and saw his relationship with Sunny as a chance for him to become the boy others viewed him as. However, Zachary's suicide had a major impact on Sunny; it made her question herself, her behaviors and actions. " Don't call me that idiotic name ever again— I want it gone!".(584) His suicide gave her a chance to be let free from the character she had been labeled as.

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Sunny moves on to live her life as Barbara. “She hadn’t been queen of the senior prom. She hadn’t even continued to be a Christian.” (584). This illuminates that Sunny “dies” in high school, and clarifies the end of adolescence for Sunny which enlightens her when she begins to think for herself. The title “Life after High School” is ironic because Zachary never had a life beyond high school. Sunny was unaware of Zachary’s homosexuality, when he would act obsessive over her she tells him it’s a free world where he then responds, “Oh no, it isn’t, Sunny. For some of us, it isn’t.”(578) He demonstrates verbal irony, because in his situation because he was not able to be open of his homosexuality; taking away his life he gave Sunny a chance to escape hers, granting her a new beginning. Zachary also implies dramatic irony in his letter, “I hereby declare all others guiltless as they are ignorant of the death of the aforementioned & the life.”(583). Sunny says, “ Oh my God— it’s all my fault.” (583). Years later when she and Tobias reunites, he is now open about his sexuality whereas back then he didn’t dare. Zachary was lost between who his heart loved, and who his mind wanted him to love which is why were both hinted at as guilty.

Oates reconciles the use of precise detail into her characters. Oates appends symbols which adds a greater understanding of the work as a whole and uses irony to support the main theme of “Life After High School”. She represents that high school is just a phase and life goes on, despite Zachary’s death Barbara and Tobias are living their best lives beyond South Lebanon. She demonstrates how insecurities during adolescence result in facades, conformity, and disguised feelings. Oates assembles how social norms and fear of rejection often lead to a negative self perception and even to mental instability in desperation.