Mirror, Mirror. . .
Reflections on Arnold Friend

We all have a face that we hide away forever
And we take them out and show ourselves
When everyone has gone.
Some are satin some are steel
Some are silk and some are leather
They’re the faces of the stranger and we love to try them on.
(The Stranger, Joel)

As the above song suggests, everyone has a side that is unfamiliar. From a Freudian point of view, an individual’s personality is a constant battle between the forces of the id and ego. Occasionally, we might see in an acquaintance a behavior that is highly unusual. Our own thoughts sometimes stray to fantasies about living the life of another person, particularly when we are daydreaming. In Joyce Carol Oates’s short story, Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?, the protagonist, a girl named Connie, often finds herself lost in a dream-world. She faces a psychological attack by a man named Arnold Friend whose intention seems to be to rape and murder her. In a psychoanalytic perspective, Friend is the product of her daydreams and symbolizes the ending of her innocence. Their encounter is a dream with Friend representing her mirror image. The story shows that people must give up their youthful purity and succumb to the evil that exists in their selves and the world around them.

Like most adolescents, Connie spends a great deal of her time lost in identifying a place for herself in the world. She often becomes lost in what her mother labels “trashy daydreams.” The music that she listens to almost religiously leaves her in a trance-like
condition. One such state occurs after her family leaves for their picnic. As she listens attentively to the music playing on the radio, we are told that she was “bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room,” and she “breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest.” The glow and rhythmic breathing suggest that she has entered a hypnotic or meditative state. In this condition her imagination starts working in full swing. She begins to create the arrival of Arnold Friend.

There are a number of instances during the confrontation with Friend that hints to the reader that the event is taking place in Connie’s imagination. Several changes occur which are not possible in the real world. Both Arnold and his companion, Ellie Oscar, change their appearances during the course of the interaction. At first Connie recognizes them as “two boys,” but later they appear to be older men. The house also changes its appearance. A curtain that has been absent for three years suddenly hangs back up in the kitchen. This event is an embedded memory of Connie’s that appears as the house is being reconstructed in her mind. As she leaves the house she does not recognize the land behind Arnold; the very landscape has been altered. This new world is the fringes of her imagination itself; she will go where she has only dreamed about before. Other strange instances include the way that time seems to be altered in Arnold’s sunglasses: “the tiny metallic world in his glasses slowing down like gelatin hardening.” Time does not flow regularly when we are dreaming. We can be asleep for eight hours and swear that we have only been out for a few minutes. Finally, reality begins to falter during Arnold’s attack. As Connie realizes the danger he poses, both Friend and the environment seem as if, “...everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was
only half real.” Another instance of altered reality is the way the telephone roars at
Connie as if it were a wild beast. The imagination can create powerful images and
change what we know as normal. All of these instances imply that an unreal dream-world exists around Connie.

Another important suggestion that Friend’s visit is a dream is the strange feeling that
Connie recognizes him as someone she cannot place. This strange cognition of Friend
gives Connie an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu, a feeling commonly experienced in
dreams. During the encounter, she realizes some of his traits are familiar to her:

She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs
and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt, and even that
slippery friendly smile of his, . . . . She recognized all this and also the singsong
way he talked, . . . and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other
in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come
together.

Another instance of déjà vu is the expression written on the side of the gold jalopy,
“MAN THE FLYING SAUCERS.” Connie places this line as an expression that was
popular at one time, but she still has a funny feeling that “the words meant something to
her that she did not yet know.” This familiar piece of the past surfaces from Connie’s
unconscious and appears to be out of place.

The above instances strongly suggest that Connie has entered a dream battleground
where she faces the evil Arnold Friend. But who is Friend? His form can be considered
to be the product of Connie’s constant “trashy daydreams.” His features are borrowed
from the boys that she has met. He is assembled while she is in the trance of the music.
We get an idea of his creation early in the story: “But all the boys fell back and dissolved
into a single face that was not even a face but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music and the humid night air of July.” This single face is the image of Arnold Friend himself. Later, when Connie faces Friend, there are a few hints that he is pieced together from her former encounters. His smile is generic: “that sleepy dreamy simile that all the boys used to get across ideas they didn’t want to put into words,” and his dress matches her expectations: “Connie liked the way he was dressed, which was the way all of them dressed.”

Possessing the good looks and style that Connie would expect her ideal man to have, the dreamy Arnold Friend has no problem capturing her attention. Yet, she soon finds out that he has evil intentions. Why would her perfect fantasy be so terrible? The answer to this lies in the view that she could be facing her antipodal image. According to G. J. Weinberger in his essay *Who is Arnold Friend? The Other Self in Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”* Arnold Friend is the mirror opposite of Connie or her Doppelgänger (22). A Doppelgänger is a wraith or apparition found in German folklore. According to these legends, every person, bird, or beast has a spirit double that is an exact, yet invisible, replica. Otto Rank, in his book, *Der Doppelgänger*, points out that similar superstitions about mirror images exist in almost every culture in the world (49). One particular German belief states that a vain girl who looks in the mirror sees the devil’s face (64). Another interesting connection may lie in the Greek myth of Narcissus. He was a handsome youth and very proud of his own beauty. While gazing into a pool of water, he mistook his reflection to be someone else. He fell so in love with the image that he would not leave the water’s edge. This eventually caused his death (68). Narcissism, the psychological term for self-love, is named after him. Connie,
like Narcissus, is infatuated with her own image. The story tells us that “she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people’s faces to make sure her own was all right.” Her fate may well be similar to Narcissus’s as she faces possible death in the end of her story.

Connie and Arnold Friend show some similar traits which suggest that they could be splits of the same person. Both seem very concerned about their looks. Connie is constantly worried about her hair and Arnold Friend seems anxious about small details in his appearance, such as making sure his sunglasses stay on top of his head. At one point in the story he rattles off a list of Connie’s friends, and he knows in detail how her parent’s picnic is proceeding. This suggest that a shared consciousness exists between the two. They also enjoy the same music and use the same swear word, “Christ,” when they are frustrated. Because they are a split of the same person, Friend is forced to wear a disguise, “His whole face was a mask . . . tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat.” The camouflage is necessary because the innocence in Connie could never accept that such evil would exist within her personality. As the song that prefaced this paper hints, there are sides of us that we want to hide. Our knowledge of these other personalities is limited. Although we are fascinated by them, just as Connie is initially interested in Friend, we eventually realize the danger they hold. Connie discovers her “other,” but rejects its existence. In the end, she accepts Friend as being a part of her psyche, and she walks out to join him.

Along with the similarities, Connie and Arnold Friend are opposite in some important ways. The fact that her double appears as an evil man can be reinforced with the Taoist
concept of the Yin and the Yang. According to this belief, each individual has two conflicting identities: masculine versus feminine, good versus evil, young versus old. The story informs us that Connie has such a split in her mannerisms: “Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home.” While at home Connie tries to project a good girl image to her family, but when she is at the mall or the restaurant, her bad girl persona comes out. With this in mind, it can be said that Arnold Friend represents the wicked side of her personality. The virtuous side of Connie stays in the house while the evil side tries to force it outside. Arnold Friend can not walk into the house because it is the haven for her innocence.

Another important difference between the two is that she is a young person trying to act more mature while he is an older individual attempting to appear younger. Adulthood comes for Connie and destroys her youth. She cries for her mother as a child would do, but it is of no use; her young, carefree days are over. She now must grapple with the insecurities and trials of maturity. As Arnold tells her, “The place where you came from ain’t there any more, and where you had in mind to go is canceled out.” She cannot return to youth and being older is not what she expected it to be. The fact that Arnold and Ellie try to disguise their ages is a testament to this. They attempt to appear young, but they are ultimately not successful. Connie may very well dread the aging process. Her mother was once pretty, but she had lost her looks with age. Connie sees a “shadowy version of herself” in her mother. She may fear that her future holds the same result.

Viewed in these ways, the encounter represents Connie’s induction to adult life. Her alter-ego forces her youth to accept her sexuality. These two images face each other through a screen door that could be viewed as a mirror frame. She resists courageously,
but is forced to accept due to the power of Arnold Friend. In the end she loses her innocence and realizes the evil in the world and herself. In the preface to the story the author states that her works are a representation of people discovering their personal identities in the face of incredible oppositions (Oates, 8). Since each person is a mixture of good and evil, Connie’s evil side forces itself upon her forming her adult identity. She fights against it, but the stronger half prevails. She crosses the threshold of the screen door and enters the adult world a beaten, but wiser individual.

In growing up, we all must face a stranger. We find ourselves thrust in an uncertain environment with little or nothing to protect us. Innocence is shed on the sharp razors of reality. During the passage into adulthood, people undergo internal and external changes. These transformations are not without conflict. How many times do we fight with ourselves when we face a transition in our lives? The good and bad aspects of the alteration clash in an inner strife. Eventually, we emerge a changed person. Our naive perception is replaced by a sad worldliness and an understanding that the life can be tragic. It usually takes a shock to knock us into the “real world.” Connie’s jolt came in the form of an evil inner self. If she survived her encounter, she must have developed a new sense of the world and her place in it. She certainly discovered that she was a complex individual, full of passions and emotions that were not always controllable. We all have these other people inside of us that we lock away. They are appealing to us, but we acknowledge their hazard. It is important that we keep them in their cages for fear that they may do harm. Still, it is interesting to think what would happen if all of the Arnold Friends in the world were unleashed at the same time. That is something to consider when looking in the mirror.
Works Cited


