Symbolic Parallelism in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”

The distinction between reality and desire is often blurred, making the perception of self and the world unclear. In Joyce Carol Oates’, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” this distinction is nearly impossible to discern as the motif of vanity drives the story, speaking of the characterization of one’s self and how they are perceived in the world. Vanity in Oates’ short story manifests itself through a monstrous character imitating the displeasing characteristics of the protagonist. This imitation provides sufficient commentary on the nature of self-absorption and its effect on the surrounding environment. Through the use of symbolism and diction the distinction between reality and fiction is explored, using an abstract character to discern the negative attributes of vanity and identity.

Confidence is an attribute that can often be deconstructed to reveal a fake veil placed over insecurities. “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” begins with the line, “Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and 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.” The audience is automatically introduced to the nature of Connie’s character, one of insecurity and vanity. The importance of Oates beginning the narrative this was is to display Connie’s habit of insecurity along with obsession with her looks. This sets the tone for the piece, making it one of a struggle for balance within oneself. As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly clear to the audience that Connie is more insecure with both her looks and personhood than she portrays. Oates writes, “Sometimes, over coffee, they were almost friends, but something would come up––some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads––and their faces went hard with contempt.” While Connie valiantly attempts to shape herself into the person she desires to be, one of beauty and complexity, she is nevertheless caught in the vexations which stump her transformation. Connie recognizes the reality of becoming the symbol of beauty which she strives, however they are discarded as nothing more than a small inconvenience such as a fly. These instances of contempt make Connie more insecure, as she is unable to achieve the persona she desires because of familial and personal limitations.

As the story progresses, the insecurity of Connie and the uneasiness she feels in life become clearer with the introduction of Arnold Friend, a symbolic representation of her internal darkness regarding insecurity and vanity. The character of Arnold Friend, speaks to Connie and displays his confidence in a demanding and straightforward manner. Arnold says, “I know all about you. But look: it's real nice and you couldn't ask for nobody better than me, or more polite.” Like Connie, Arnold is placing extreme value in himself, trying to coerce Connie into having sex with him. Arnold is reflecting Connie by speaking to her like she thinks about herself, focusing the conversation on her attractive looks rather than what she actually wants and is willing to consent to. Connie thinks that she is better than most everyone because she is not boring, but when Arnold says this statement, there is a parallel between his words and her self perception, causing the audience to see the similarities in the two persons by showing their values being based around vanity.

It is clear to the reader that Arnold is not actually being nice, but rather manipulative and demanding - advancing even after Connie said no. But how does Arnold know all about Connie? It is unclear to the reader how he knows every detail about Connie’s family and her life, but the similarities in values and vanity showcase that Arnold is a symbol for Connie and her internal struggle with her positive attributes besides sexuality. Oates writes, “She put her hands up against her ears as if she'd heard something terrible, something not meant for her.” Arnold is speaking directly at Connie, yet she feels that she has heard something that was dangerous to her ears. She is realizing that she has no control over the situation, that her reality in this moment is not directly what she desires. Connie is no longer vain, but she is scared. This is the first time that the audience is introduced to Connie showing emotion other than gluttony and anger. Arnold is symbolizing what Connie has been feeling about not receiving more of her mother’s love through forcing her to feel emotion and desire their presence. Usually acting confident and in control of all situations, Connie realizes that she is powerless. Arnold is utilized to show that Connie has more substance and qualities to her than just her looks, she is also complex and trying to figure out a way to leave the situation.

Diction is utilized through Connie and Arnold’s encounter to showcase that the difference between reality and desire can only be made clear by oneself. Oates writes, “She looked out to see Arnold Friend pause and then take a step toward the porch, lurching. He almost fell. But, like a clever drunken man, he managed to catch his balance.” The use of the word “lurch” brings attention to the urgency of the situation. The diction that the author uses gives Arnold monster like characteristics, portraying him as something other-worldly. This monsteresque characterization further demonstrates the parallel between Connie and Arnold by demonstrating to the reader that he is not just an unsettling, demanding man - but rather a symbol for Connie’s inner fears about herself. Like Arnold lurching towards Connie to lure her to him, Connie uses her vanity to lure others in, making sure their attention is on her - because that is what she knows she is good at. Arnold remains confident while talking to Connie, which can be seen as a parallel to Connie upholding her desire to be pretty even though she is clearly upset by not receiving more of her mother’s love and attention. Arnold is upset that Connie will not cooperate with him, that she is not behaving in the way which he wants her to. Connie experiences this in the same fashion by criticizing her mother’s plainess.

Oates makes Arnold an actual person which symbolizes Connie’s internal struggle of placing all of her attention on her looks rather than an explicit explanation of her discontent for the purpose of engaging the audience and making them feel urgency to the situation. It is clear to the audience that Connie is in trouble because there is a physical entity threatening her well being, but if Connie’s discontent with herself was not made physical but emotional, the situation would not seem as urgent. Connie desires a life of content and happiness, but the reality is she has not reached that. This is shown through her expression of fear when Arnold matches her confidence and direct expression of sexuality. The reader sees the same traits in Arnold which were expressed earlier in the story, but enhanced. Connie is looking at herself, but an amplified version to understand the severity of her discontent with her reality, which does not match her desires.

Through the interaction between Arnold and Connie, the motif of vanity is used to express what the differences are between someone’s desires and reality. Arnold expresses all of the traits which Connie once praised herself for, but symbolizes how they can be malicious. Connie realizes that what Arnold is portraying is not right, making it a direct commentary on her own actions.