

CONNIE'S TAMBOURINE MAN: A NEW READING OF ARNOLD FRIEND

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The critical reception of Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" reveals a consistent pattern for reducing the text to a manageable, univocal reading. Generally, this pattern involves two assumptions: Arnold *must* symbolize Satan and Connie *must* be raped and murdered. No critic has yet questioned Joyce Wegs' assertion that "Arnold is clearly a symbolic Satan."¹ Marie Urbanski argues that Arnold's "feet resemble the devil's cloven hoofs," Joan Winslow calls the story "an encounter with the devil," Tom Quirk maintains the story describes a "demoniac character," and Christina Marsden Gillis refers to "the satanic visitor's incantation."² Wegs' assertion that Arnold is "a criminal with plans to rape and probably murder Connie"³ is also accepted at face value. Gillis assumes that Arnold "leads his victim . . . to a quick and violent sexual assault,"⁴ and Quirk refers to "the rape and subsequent murder of Connie."⁵ Even though Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood correctly claim that the portrait of Arnold "is created in the mind of Connie . . . and that it exists *there only*," they still persist in having Arnold as a demon and Connie as doomed: "But we know that he is still the Wolf, and that he still intends to 'gobble up' this 'little girl' as soon as he gets the chance. Connie is not going to live happily ever after. Indeed, it would seem that she is not going to live at all."⁶

While all of these critics insist on seeing satanic traces in Arnold, they refuse, on the other hand, to see that these traces are only part of a much more complex, more dynamic symbol. There are indeed diabolic shades to Arnold, but just as Blake and Shelley could see in Milton's Satan a positive, attractive symbol of the poet, the rebellious embodiment of creative energy,

1. Joyce M. Wegs, " 'Don't You Know Who I Am?' The Grotesque in Oates' 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' " in *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), p. 90. First printed in *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 5 (1975), 66-72.

2. Marie Urbanski, "Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates' 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' " *Studies in Short Fiction*, 15 (1978), 202; Joan Winslow, "The Stranger Within: Two Stories by Oates and Hawthorne," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 17 (1980), 264; Tom Quirk "A Source for 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' " *Studies in Short Fiction*, 18 (1981), 416; Christina Marsden Gillis, " 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?': Seduction, Space, and a Fictional Mode," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 18 (1981), 70.

3. Wegs, p. 89.

4. Gillis, p. 65.

5. Quirk, p. 416.

6. Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood, "In Fairyland, Without a Map: Connie's Exploration Inward in Joyce Carol Oates' 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' " *Literature and Psychology*, 30 (1980), 156 & 165 & 166, respectively.

so we should also be sensitive to Arnold's multifaceted and creative nature. Within the frame of the story, the fiction of Arnold burns in the day as the embodiment of poetic energy. The story is dedicated to Bob Dylan, the troubadour, the artist. Friend is the artist, the actor, the rhetorician, the teacher, all symbolized by Connie's overheated imagination. We should not assume that Arnold is completely evil because she is afraid of him. Her limited perceptions remind us of Blake's questioner in "The Tyger" who begins to perceive the frightening element of the experiential world but also is rather duped into his fear by his own limitations. Like the figure in Blake, Connie is the framer, the story creator — and the diabolic traces in her fiction frighten her not because they are the manifestations of an outside evil but because they are the symbolic extrapolations of her own psyche.

If the adamant insistence that Arnold Friend is Satan is rejected, then who is this intriguing mysterious visitor? In *Enter Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction*, Roy Male asserts that many mysterious intruders throughout American literature "are almost always potential saviors, destroyers, or ambiguous combinations of both, and their initial entrance, however much it may be displaced toward realism, amounts to the entrance of God or the devil on a machine."⁷ And if Arnold Friend is *not* satanic, then his arrival could be that of a savior. This possibility moreover is suggested by Connie's whispering "Christ. Christ"⁸ when Arnold first arrives in his golden "machine." Not only is "33" part of Arnold's "secret code" of numbers (p. 41), but his sign, an "X" that seems to hover in the air, is also one of the symbols for Christ. Because music is closely associated with religion — "the music was always in the background, like music at a church service" (p. 36) — it also adds a religious element to Arnold's arrival. The key question then is who is this musical messiah, and the key to the answer is the dedication "For Bob Dylan" — the element of the story so unsatisfactorily accounted for by our predecessors. Not only does the description of Arnold Friend also fit Bob Dylan — a type of rock-and-roll messiah — but three of Dylan's songs (popular when the story was written) are very similar to the story itself.

In the mid-sixties Bob Dylan's followers perceived him to be a messiah. According to his biographer, Dylan was "a rock-and-roll king."⁹ It is no wonder then that Arnold speaks with "the voice of the man on the radio" (p. 46), the disc jockey whose name, Bobby King, is a reference to "Bobby" Dylan, the "king" of rock-and-roll. Dylan was more than just a "friend" to his listeners; he was "Christ revisited," "the prophet leading [his followers]

7. Roy Male, *Enter Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), p. 21.

8. Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" in *The Wheel of Love* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1970), p. 40. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

9. Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1971), p. 222.

into [a new] Consciousness."¹⁰ In fact, "people were making him an idol; . . . thousands of men and women, young and old, felt their lives entwined with his because they saw him as a mystic, a messiah who would lead them to salvation."¹¹

That Oates consciously associates Arnold Friend with Bob Dylan is clearly suggested by the similarities of their physical descriptions. Arnold's "shaggy, shabby black hair that looked crazy as a wig" (p. 40), his "long and hawklike nose" (p. 42), his unshavened face, his "big and white" teeth (p. 45), his lashes, "thick and black as if painted with a black tarlike material" (p. 45) and his size ("only an inch or so taller than Connie" [p. 42]) are all characteristic of Bob Dylan. Even Arnold's "fast, bright monotone voice" (p. 40) is suggestive of Dylan, especially since he speaks "in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song" (p. 43).

Dylan then provides a physical model for Arnold's appearance and a historical referent for Arnold's existence. Yet more profoundly, the myth of Dylan's being organized or somehow controlled by his music is reflected by Connie, Arnold, and Ellie being organized or perhaps even unified by the almost mystical music heard throughout the story. Connie, for example, notices the way Arnold "tapped one fist against another in homage to the perpetual music behind him" (p. 45). Since this "perpetual music" is the one thing that Connie can "depend upon" (p. 36), it even becomes her breath of life; she is "bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself, . . . breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise of her chest" (p. 39). Paying "close attention" to the words and singing along with the songs played on the "XYZ Sunday Jamboree," Connie spends her Sunday afternoon worshipping "the music that made everything so good" (p. 36). And when her two visitors arrive, "the same program . . . playing inside the house" (p. 41) is also playing on Ellie Oscar's radio. In fact, "the music from [Connie's] radio and [Ellie's] blend together" (p. 44). Ellie is so closely associated with the radio that without it pressed up against his ear, he grimaces "as if . . . the air was too much for him" (p. 50). Both Ellie's and Arnold's existences seem to depend completely on the "perpetual music"; consequently, Oates appears to be suggesting that they are not literally present. They are instead part of Connie's musically induced fantasy — another of her so-called "trashy daydreams" (p. 35).

Oates points out that Connie spends her summer "thinking, dreaming of the boys she met" (p. 38). But because of Connie's gradually changing desires, "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" (p. 38). This "urgent" feeling reflects Connie's desire for something more sexually stimulating than the kissing sessions she spends with "boys" like Eddie. As Freud points out, "the motive forces

10. Scaduto, p. 274.

11. Scaduto, p. 229.

of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality. . . . In young women the erotic wishes predominate almost exclusively."¹² Although we acknowledge the sexist nature of Freud's generalization, his point seems to apply to Connie. Furthermore, Roy Male suggests that even though "there is no logical reason for the entrance of a stranger, it is equally true that he comes as if in answer to some unuttered call."¹³ Arnold is described as "talking right through Connie's voice" (p. 42) because that is the only voice he has. His arrival is the answer to Connie's "unuttered" call and to her "erotic" desires. Arnold's "face" is therefore "familiar" (p. 42) because it is the "face" that replaces the "boys" in her fantasies. Not only is the emphasis placed on Arnold's face reinforced by "a drawing of a round grinning face" (p. 41) on his car, but when Connie first encounters Arnold at Napoleon's drive-in restaurant, he is described as "a face just a few feet from hers" (p. 37) — perhaps her own distorted reflection in a car windshield.

Connie not only turns away from Arnold's face "without Eddie noticing anything" (p. 37), but many other elements in the story suggest that Arnold is just another "shadowy vision of [Connie] herself" (p. 34). For example, Arnold is described as being "just a blur . . . that . . . had come from nowhere . . . and belonged nowhere and that everything about him . . . was only half real" (p. 46). His "fake" laughter suggests that his threatening presence is "all a joke" (p. 42). He opens the door to his car carefully because it might fall off, he cannot walk without stumbling, his feet seem not to be in his boots, and he wears a mask and make-up. He even touches his sunglasses "as if to make sure they were still there" (p. 51). He also magically knows Connie's name, her best friend's name, her other friend's names, and where her parents are and when they will return. Part of the action that takes place also suggests a dream-like experience. Arnold's asking Connie if she has something against a dead woman, Connie's inability to dial the telephone, and Arnold's promise not to come into the house are all tinged with a sense of unreality. Even the fact that the phrase "as if" is used over thirty times suggests that there is something dubious about Connie's experience.

In order to reinforce the idea that Arnold's visit is another fantasy, Oates parallels the actual description of one of Connie's other daydreams to the description of her finally joining Arnold Friend at the story's end:

Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the

12. Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreamers," in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 468.

13. Male, p. 21.

night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs; and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was, the back yard ran off into weeds and a fence-like line of trees and behind it the sky was perfectly blue and still. The asbestos "ranch house" that was now three years old startled her — it looked small. She shook her head as if to get awake. (p. 39)

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him — so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it. (p. 54)

The fence-like line of trees is replaced by "the vast sunlit reaches of the land" surrounding Arnold Friend. Through her encounter with this mysterious stranger, Connie frees herself from the sense of confinement she feels in her father's house. As Roy Male so aptly explains it, the "mysterious strangers who are potential saviors" force the "insider" to undergo a transformation, which "may involve the effort of the insider to break out of his fixed orientation."¹⁴ The Dylanesque music initiates such a breakthrough for Connie. She no longer has to "dawdle in the doorway" (p. 41). As Dylan suggests in "Mister Tambourine Man," once she answers the call by forcing open the screen door, "there are no fences facin'" her any longer. She broadens her horizons to include the "vast sunlit reaches of the land" all around her.

The reference to "Mister Tambourine Man" implies another connection between the story and Dylan. A few of his song lyrics are very similar to the story itself. Oates herself suggests that part of the story's inspiration was "hearing for some weeks Dylan's song 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue.'"¹⁵ Such lines as "you must leave now," "something calls for you," "the vagabond who's rapping at your door," and "go start anew" are suggestive of the impending change awaiting Connie. Two other Dylan songs are equally as applicable though. The following lines from "Like a Rolling Stone" — the second most popular song of 1965 (the story was first published in 1966) — are also very similar to Connie's situation at the end of the story:

You used to be so amused
At Napoleon in rags and the language that he used
Go to him now, he calls you, you can't refuse

14. Male, p. 10.

15. "Interview with Joyce Carol Oates about 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" in *Mirrors: An Introduction to Literature*, eds. John R. Knott, Jr. and Christopher R. Keaske, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1975), pp. 18-19.

When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose
 You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.

But Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" — the number ten song in 1965 — is even more similar. The following stanza establishes the notion of using music to rouse one's imagination into a blissful fantasy world:

Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin' ship,
 My senses have been stripped,
 My hands can't feel to grip,
 My toes too numb to step,
 Wait only for my boot heels to be wanderin'.
 I'm ready to go anywhere,
 I'm ready for to fade
 Into my own parade.
 Cast your dancin' spell my way,
 I promise to go under it.

Hey, Mister Tambourine Man, play a song for me,
 I'm not sleepy and there ain't no place I'm going to.
 Hey, Mister Tambourine Man, play a song for me.
 In the jingle, jangle morning I'll come followin' you.

Arnold Friend's car — complete with the phrase "MAN THE FLYING SAUCERS" (p. 44) — is just such "a magic swirlin' ship." Arnold is the personification of popular music, particularly Bob Dylan's music; and as such, Connie's interaction with him is a musically induced fantasy, a kind of "magic carpet ride" in "a convertible jalopy painted gold." Rising out of Connie's radio, Arnold Friend/Bob Dylan is a magical, musical messiah; he persuades Connie to abandon her father's house. As a manifestation of her own desires, he frees her from the limitations of a fifteen-year-old girl, assisting her maturation by stripping her of her childlike vision.

