Confidence Games or the Tricks of the Con Man

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”

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The most important aspect of a successful con is the simple issue of confidence. The con artist places his confidence in his “mark,” or victim, of his scam. His goal is for the “mark” to then place her confidence in him. Thus the con artist exploits the human psychology of mirroring, or the fact that people who are engaging each with each other often mimic each other’s behavior subconsciously. In order to avoid making the mark feel sleazy or put-off, the successful con artist makes it seem like it is an interaction between two good people, with honesty and real sympathy at the core.

Anyone can be conned, especially regarding things they really want. A person needing health benefits would more likely fall victim to a health insurance con, for example. However, the more life experience a person has, the less likely they are to fall victim.

I think we could argue about what Connie wants—does she want a boyfriend to love her? Does she want to be appreciated? Does she want to have sex? Joyce Carol Oates leaves it purposefully open and unexplained: “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 pounding of the music and the humid night air of July” (252.) Before Arnold arrives at her house, she is daydreaming, “dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love…and 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” (253).

So while Arnold cannot “con” us, the readers of the narrative, he attempts to exploit Connie’s desires, however diffuse they are.

Con-man Someone perpetrating a crime of trickery, in which the victim willingly gives up his/her valued possessions. In this way, the con man can leave the scene before the robbery is noted, and if questioned by any law enforcement, can say that the victim willingly surrendered the valuables.

Mark The victim of the con. The mark is not supposed to realize he/she is being conned until the game is over, and the con-man is gone. If the mark figures it out in the middle of the game, the con-man can quickly leave, or decide to rob the person outright, in the old-fashioned sense, by using threats, pulling a gun, or whatever else he decides is effective once the “game” is up. However, a con-man wishes to evade the law, and outright robbery will catch up with him quickly.

Schill The accomplice of the con-man, often a “prop” in the game. This person plays a part in the manipulation, either by vouching for the con-artist’s credibility, or by simply being a reference point for the con artist’s story.

Usually con-games revolve around stealing money from people. Obviously, Arnold Friend does not want money from Connie (notice her name and its play on the word “con”), but he does use a false pretense to extract a high price—her virginity and her life (the latter depending on how you read it).

He uses old con man’s “tricks” to manipulate her, tactics that reader sees through and watches in disgust:

1. Pretending to “know” a person, to “get them:

“I know my Connie…” (256)

1. Telling the mark what they know:

“This is your day set aside for a ride with me and you know it” (256).

1. Getting the mark to agree to the terms early on in the game:

Connie: “Where”

Arnold: “Where what”

Connie: “Where’re we going?” (257) (Note that he actually gets her to say that she is coming with him very early in the interaction, which is what she eventually does.)

1. Making the game seem fresh, or new, so that the mark doesn’t think you do it all the time:

“It was as if the idea of going for a ride somewhere, to someplace, was a new idea for him” (257).

1. Creating a cheerful, confident persona that distracts from the bad intentions:

“He spoke in a simple, lilting voice, exactly as if he was reciting the words to a song. His smile assured her that everything was fine.”

1. Distracting the mark with a lot of extraneous details, so they don’t put it together:

“She recognized all this…but all these things did not come together” (258).

1. Using the schill to distract the mark from the con, or to slow the game when it might be falling apart:

“Then, abruptly, he seemed to become embarrassed and looked over his shoulder at Ellie. ‘*Him*, he’s crazy, ‘ he said. ‘Ain’t he a riot? He’s a nut, a real character.’”

1. Telling your mark that you **won’t do what they most fear:**

“Listen, here’s how it is. I always tell the truth and I promise you this: I ain’t coming in that house after you” (261).

1. Getting your mark to do stuff for you, even insignificant things (pick a card, any card!) in order to establish your power:

“’That’s a good girl. Put the phone back.’

She kicked the phone away from her.

‘No honey, put it back right.’

She picked it up and put it back. The dial tone stopped.

‘That’s a good girl. Now, you come outside’” (265).

In order for a con to work, it has to go smoothly, without any chinks in the armor, or the façade. In the case of Connie’s abduction, there are a few serious problems in Arnold’s game.

1. She notices his fakery, or his façade, early on:

“She could see that he wasn’t a kid, he was much older—thirty, maybe more. At his knowledge her heart began to pound faster” (259)

“His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered makeup on his face but had forgotten about his throat” (261).

1. He steps out of character, losing his cheerful demeanor:

“Maybe you better step out here,” he said, and this last was in a different voice. It was a little flatter, as if the heat was finally getting to him” (260).

1. He has to resort to straightforward coercion, and threats, which break the con game, and cause Connie to lose confidence in him:

“‘If the place got lit up with a fire, honey, you’d come runnin’ out into my arms, right into my arms an’ safe at home—like you knew I was your lover and’d stopped fooling around. I don’t mind a nice shy girl but I don’t like no fooling around’ (262).

1. His schill breaks his game by showing their bottom line, which is that they will use violence as necessary:

“’You want that telephone line pulled out? Ellie said. He held the radio away from his ear and grimaced, as if without the radio the air was too much for him.

‘I toldja shut up, Ellie.’ Arnold Friend said, ‘you’re deaf, get a hearing aid, right? Fix yourself up. This little girl’s no trouble and’s gonna be nice to me, so Ellie keep to yourself, this ain’t your date—right? Don’t hem in on me, don’t hog, don’t crush, don’t bird dog, don’t trail me’ he said in a rapid, meaningless voice, as if he were running through all the expressions he’d learned but was no longer sure which of them was in style, then rushing on to new ones, making them up with his eyes closed” (264).