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Growing Up, a 'Friend' and a Foe

“That horrifying moment when you are looking for an adult, and you realize you are an adult, so you start looking for ... an adultier adult.”¹ This humorous comment explains the panic of growing from an adolescent who has an excuse to rely on other more experienced grown-ups to an adult who is expected to take full responsibility for her actions. Many of our personal experiences make adulthood seem like a trap we are “stuck” in. Not everyone holds this negative view towards growing up, however. To many children, reaching adulthood seems like a fascinating event where they can gain access to all the “fun and excitement” forbidden to them as children. In a story centering around a similar fifteen-year-old girl transitioning from childhood to adulthood, namely the short story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates, a stranger visits the young girl when she is home alone and threatens her to come outside to him. **Looking deeper into the intense conflict between the two, the apparent antagonist, Arnold Friend, can be understood as the projection of Connie’s desires to become an adult, depicting the complexity of the transition into adulthood.**

Connie’s yearning to grow up is illustrated by the exposition which displays the contrasting settings of home and the outside world. This story’s protagonist is a beautiful 15-year-old girl named Connie, who habitually checks how she looks in the mirror. The story only provides the readers with her inner thoughts and feelings, narrated in a limited omniscient point of view. The exposition of this story consists of the main character’s

everyday life at home and her other life outside, and here readers are introduced to the main character and her family. The exposition starts by describing the main character's relationship with her family. The protagonist does not seem close to her family, and her family members are minor characters who are relatively undeveloped. Connie's distant relationship with them acts as one of the causes of the dangerous visit of Arnold Friend. As for the setting in which these characters are placed, we can guess that the story takes place in the 1970s in America, considering Bobby King's song playing on the radio. Connie enjoys going to the shopping plaza with her friends, so the story takes place mainly in the shopping plaza and her home. The contrast between these two locations is notable because Connie has two different sides, one for her home, where her family is, and another for the shopping plaza, where she is free from their watch. This two-sidedness can be understood in connection with the story's overall theme. Inside her house, she is a child who lives under the protection of her parents, while the shopping plaza is a place where she has the freedom to go out with boys and go to restaurants where the "older kids" hang out. However, the outside world is characterized by danger as well as freedom, as shown by Connie's first encounter with the antagonist of the story, Arnold Friend, in the exposition.

While the exposition provides the base for the theme of the complexity of adulthood, this theme becomes more evident as the story buckles down to the rising action, climax, and falling action. The rising action of the story is when Connie is left alone in her house, her family having left for a barbecue party, and a stranger's car pulls up in the driveway. The stranger, who introduces himself as Arnold Friend, tries to force Connie to leave the house and come with him. As Connie is reluctant and rejects his suggestion, he starts to threaten her. His intimidating behavior leads to the climax, where Connie is so frightened that she screams into the phone and cries for help. Here, the tone of narration

becomes increasingly intense compared to the relatively calm tone in the exposition when she was within the safe boundaries of her parents' protection. Subsequently, in the falling action, Connie feels a sense of emptiness and seems to give in to Arnold Friend, walking towards the door. In the resolution, she watches herself open the door out to where the antagonist awaits. Since we are not provided with any explanation on what eventually happened to her, the story has an open ending, allowing readers to ponder on the implications of the story.

We can approach this underlying theme through the imagery of disassociation and belittlement. The imagery of disassociation begins with Connie being startled by how different the places she was used to seem to be. Before the arrival of Arnold Friend, she is stunned at how small the "asbestos ranch house" looks. Moreover, being threatened by Arnold Friend, her eyes cannot recognize the room she is in. Connie's disassociation peaks at the part where Connie describes watching herself exit the house as if her soul left her body and was watching from afar. The imagery of disconnection represents Connie's outgrowth. She is no longer the child she used to be, so the places she used to be familiar with suddenly feel distant and strange. As described in the scene where Connie gives in to Arnold Friend, she leaves her childhood behind in her house, which can keep it safe, and that version of her watches the new adult Connie walk into the open air outside the house. Another notable visual image is when Connie sees her world in miniature inside the reflection of Arnold Friend's metallic glasses. This scene shows how Connie's current life as an adolescent seems to be so small compared to the vast adult world.

The sunglasses do not only belittle Connie's world but are also one of the "mirrors" that repeatedly appear throughout the story symbolizing transition and truth, which leads us to the interpretation that Arnold Friend symbolizes adulthood. Mirrors constantly appear in Oates's literary work, sometimes in the form of objects like windshields

and sunglasses. Mirrors have been a popular symbol used throughout history in various artworks and literature, and many myths exist about these objects. First, in several cultures, a myth exists that mirrors are the passage of this life and the afterlife². The two worlds correspond to adolescence and adulthood, which could signify Connie's shift into the grown-up world. Connie's constant checking of the mirror parallels a young child peering into the world beyond the fine line between childhood and adulthood, filled with curiosity. Mirrors also represent the truth³. While what is seen is the apparent version of self displayed for society to see, the mirror reveals the more profound truth concealed from others. This truth could be a deeply felt desire; perhaps one society does not approve of. Connie's desire could be a yearning for what is only accessible to adults, which would be considered inappropriate for a 15-year-old girl.

The symbolization of mirrors supports the interpretation that the antagonist is the projection of the protagonist's desire to become a grown-up. This approach could explain how Arnold Friend knows information about Connie that she never told him. He knows her so well because he is, in fact, her. Arnold Friend symbolizes adulthood, implied in the description that it appears to Connie that this man is in his thirties. A part of her wishes to get out of her house and into adulthood, just as Arnold Friend suggests, because the fence that her parents' protection forms also acts as a restraint. However, although Arnold Friend symbolizes the adulthood that Connie desires, he is not depicted as a positive character. He is an intimidating man who threatens to hurt Connie's family if she does not do as he says and that he will come inside the house to get her if she touches the phone.

This negative depiction of the antagonist conflicts with his name, "Friend," creating an irony that implies the negative aspects of growth. The antagonist's last name is "Friend," when he is clearly a foe. As with all ironies, if we look at the more profound

meaning, his name is not ironic after all. It shows the two-sidedness of adulthood. Growing up obviously has its positive aspects, such as being independent and having the freedom to pave the way for life in any direction possible. Like his name, these aspects are positive, like a friend. Growing up is not all fun and games, however. Growth is filled with dangerous threats, just like Arnold Friend's personality and is also filled with uncertainty, just as how Connie could not see where he was looking because of his sunglasses. As adolescents, the grown-up world is full of mystery, and not much is known about it. Although Connie knows Arnold Friend is dangerous, she eventually gives in and follows him outside. Her final decision implies that we cannot avoid growing up, and we have no choice but to accept and face the dangers it entails.

The antagonist's ironic name as well as the symbols of mirrors and imagery of disjunction and undervaluation portray the two-sided aspects of growing up. The transition into adulthood is craved by the young, and while everyone inevitably reaches this phase at a certain point in their lives, it is a process mixed with pain. Nonetheless, we proceed into adulthood, just like Connie stepped out of her house into the outside. The vast lands behind our friend and foe show the life ahead of us, a life that is yet unknown. (1564)

Citation

1.

“That horrifying moment when you are looking for an adult, and you realize you are an adult, so you start looking for an adultier adult”. America’s best pics, Kevin Peterson, 30 November 2020, <https://americasbestpics.com/picture/that-horrifying-moment-when-youre-looking-for-an-adult-but-r59tuG3B8>.

2.

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3.

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