A PSYCHOANALYSIS OF “WHERE ARE YOU GOING, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?”

The short story entitled “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates touched off a heated discussion when it was published in 1966. Critics have applied various literary theories and approaches to this fascinating and perplexing story. There are multiple interpretations of this story from different perspective. Feminist critics argue that Oates writes Connie as a young woman who suffers the same experience with other women in a patriarchal society. Some critics explore the literal reasons behind the story which usually come down to the cultural or social issue such as violence and rape that the author wants to address. Psychological analysis probes Connie’s mind to seek the psychological reasons leading her to her final decision. While all these interpretations have made their own points, they also have flaws in their arguments. Fresh readings are always in need to provide a broader and deeper way to understand this story.

Psychoanalytic criticism usually is to analyze and evaluate a literary work with the application of a certain psychological principle which is established by theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. With the help of this approach, this paper will examine the story to see how author presents a battle among id, ego and superego through Connie’s struggle in making decision to choose between ordinary family life and adventure with a stranger. The superego is presented by Connie’s sister and her mother while Arnold Friend plays the part of id. The analysis will mainly focus on the interaction between Connie and other people, the role that Arnold Friend plays in the story and symbolic meaning of music in the story. Alternative interpretations also will be discussed for comparison and weakness will be pointed out and refuted.

The story begins with an introduction of Connie and her family life. “Her name was Connie”. “She was fifteen”. And like any other normal girls, she cares her appearance and want other’s acceptance which she can hardly get from her family. Her mother always condemns her and praises her sister. Her father just simply ignores them in daily life. Connie never feels close to any of her family members, and she prefers life out of home with her friend to a cinema, shopping mall and their favorite place, a drive-in restaurant where she feel free. In his article of psychological analysis of Connie, Clifford J.

Kurkowski sees the isolation and alienation that Connie get from her family and confidence and feelings of taking control that she get when she is out as the psychological basis which cause her to choose leave in the end. However, he limits his view to social acceptance while something deeper remains unnoticed. Connie hates home not only because of her relationship with her family but also pressure she feels. June, her sister, represents the perfect image or good model that the society requires. Her mother becomes an “executor” who binds her by criticizing her bad behavior and recommending the good behavior. They then together represent the “superego” of Connie that follows rules and restricts the bad desire. The drive-in restaurant is where “id” of Connie breaks the constraints of “superego” to seek satisfaction. However, the sensible part, the “ego” of Connie, is still in control at that time until it loses control in the battle against “id”.

The “id” of Connie which reflects her true desire for sex and excitement is represented by Arnold Friend. He shows up when other family members are out, and there is no supervision and protection for Connie who is vulnerable to hurt and temptation. He appears to be very charming and appealing with his shining car, glaring sunglasses and bright jalopy. The fact that Arnold knows everything about her without a proper reason, somehow, suggests that he is more than someone who offers cares and acceptance as Clifford J. Kurkowski argues in his article. And Arnold Friend tempts Connie later in the story by uttering the truth of her deepest desire in an order tone. The confrontation between Connie and Arnold suggests the battle between the “ego” and “id”. The conversation that Arnold offers invitations and Connie refuses him records the fight between the “ego” and “id” for control. Bess Rhode’s interpretation that this story criticizes and emphasizes the violence and rape towards women can hardly hold water. In the process, there is no physical violence involved. All struggles stay on the psychological level. Connie feels more and more powerless in the process till she totally surrenders to the temptation of “id”. She once resists when she realize that it’s dangerous to blindly follows the temptation and desires. However, her resistance is useless since Arnold claims “This place you are now-inside your daddy’s house-is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it”. It seems to be the only reasonable choice for her to go with him. At that point, Connie’s “ego” totally loses its position to “id”.

Music is something throughout the story and plays a significant role in the process of confrontations. Patrick Paul Christle offers a detailed analysis of songs involved in the story as evidence that music strengthens the feminism theme. Since there is no direct use of lyrics in the text, this analysis appears to be farfetched. Music here is more like a bridge or the door between “ego” and “id”. Connie feels free wherever there is music. In the drive-in restaurant, she listens to the music when she enjoys attention and freedom. In home alone, she listens to Bob Dylan when her family is out and there is no restriction. Clifford J. Kurkowski also states that music “captures Connie by reminding her that once it stops playing she re-enters society.” It’s music that blurs the boundary between rationality and desire and allows her go self-indulgence. When she confronts Arnold Friend, there are several times that Connie notices that he uses lyrics and feel him more persuasive then. Again, music shows as a guide that leads her to instinctual impulses.

The story of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” tells how a girl fails to resist temptation of her desire and lead to self-ruin. The author depicts the struggle of her “ego”, the sensational part, against her “id” represented by Arnold Friend with “superego” absent. There are several rounds of confrontation in which “ego” and “id” trying to gain control. However, Connie surrenders herself to her desire at the end. An unfortunate future then doomed for her since the author suggests in the end of the story that she is going to some place that she “had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it”.