

The Other Short Guide

The Other by Thomas Tryon

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Characters

Niles and Holland Perry appear initially as normal thirteen-year-old boys, Niles just a bit more considerate than most, while Holland, apparently the more strong-willed of the two, has a streak of malice. One suspects, however, that Holland's tendency to mockery may derive from a secret envy of Niles, who is generally more competent in games of skill than Holland and more beloved, perhaps, for his sunnier disposition. No matter what mean pranks Holland is guilty of, however, Niles never violates the code of secrecy between them — even when Holland causes their father's death.

Certain odd facts suggest that Niles is more ambivalent than he first appears. Although he seems subservient to Holland's whims, he possesses a gold ring with the family crest of a peregrine falcon on it, which once belonged to Holland. He carries it, with another mysterious object, eventually revealed as a severed finger, in a tobacco can concealed in his shirt next to his skin, a hiding place shared by a live chameleon. These objects feature in macabre events in the course of the story, as the full complexity of the double personality of the surviving twin comes to light.

There are several minor characters which receive minimal character development: a mysteriously ill mother confined mostly to her room, an obnoxious cousin who jumps into the hay mow where he is impaled on a pitchfork, an aged neighbor woman with a weak heart who may have been helped into the next world by a close encounter with the pet lizard.

The really important character, other than the twins, is the maternal grandmother, Ada Katerina Vedrenya, formerly a Russian peasant, something of a mystic and a wise woman, or perhaps in one sense a mythic queen of the night. She teaches the boys, especially Niles, who is the more apt pupil, to have hypnotic or out-of-body experiences, projecting themselves into a bird or a butterfly, for instance, to know the miracle of flight. It is, for the most part, a joyous game of expanded awareness. When she realizes to what pernicious purposes this ESP is being used, however, she assumes another mythic role, that of the angel of death.



Social Concerns

The theme of the Double is one of the most fascinating elements of gothic fiction, carrying with it a whole catalogue of literary conventions: the reflected image in the mirror or in water, the identical twin, the changeling, the dead who possess the living, the unfettered subconscious, family madness, the Devil. All these apply to The Other, which is a vague term for some possibly metaphysical entity which imposes its will on one's consciousness or behavior, a presence never recognized as a part of oneself, although psychologists may call it a projection of forbidden impulses, perhaps the Jungian Shadow.

In medieval literature, the projected source of evil was often the Devil or the witch. Modern gothic novels are somewhat more circumspect, suggesting that devils are probably internal and human, perhaps devices for escaping personal guilt. Nevertheless, since the modern imagination has never given up its fondness for personified evil, the mysterious "Other" lives on in many variations as werewolf or ghost or monster. Here, he is the strangely perverse twin, Holland, who presumably inherited evil, while his brother Niles seems remarkably free of any moral taint.

The author is not really so naive as to suggest that good and evil are neatly divided so that one twin, by some twist of fate, might get all the "morality genes," while the other boy inherits only from Cain. In fact, the demarcation between one twin and the other progressively blurs as the reader gradually realizes that Niles, the "good" one, has so perfected his powers of extrasensory perception that he can assume his brother's identity and act as Holland might act. He learned from his grandmother Ada a mental game of concentrating on an external object so single-mindedly that he seems to be that object, knowing it intimately from the inside. When Holland falls into a well while hanging his grandmother's cat from the well rope, Niles is so traumatically shocked that he cannot admit his companion's death. The grandmother, fearing that Niles will literally die of grief, encourages him to think of Holland as still alive. She thinks Niles will outgrow this harmless fiction when he becomes strong enough to live without his twin. Instead, the dead Holland becomes a living and acting presence to his brother, doing those things which his gentler twin deplures.

Thus, Niles is obsessed and possessed by his potentially cruel and amoral twin, creating one disaster after another.

Tryon is using certain psychological or quasi-scientific ideas, such as the uncanny sensitivity of twins to each other's mental state, the propensity of some children to create imaginary companions, the principle of ESP, to provide plausibility for a gothic tale of demonic possession. The supernatural possibilities are contained in events which might conceivably have some psychological explanation.



Techniques

Like most gothic novels, *The Other* is replete with symbols and allusions. In one scene, Niles is trying to interest Holland in the constellations, especially the Gemini, those famous brothers of classical myth, Castor and Pollux, models of brotherly love. Although there is no direct mention of the story, students of mythology may remember that the bond of the Gemini extended beyond the death of Castor. When the surviving twin prayed for death, Zeus allowed him to share his life with his brother, both brothers spending every other day in Hades and every other day alive on earth.

Grandmother Ada always wears on her dress a pin shaped like the crescent moon, symbol of the ancient queen of heaven, who, in another phase, was the death goddess. Niles scratches his cheek on the moon pin in the compulsive, despairing embrace of Ada when she realizes the truth about her beloved grandchild.

Christian symbols share the stage with references to Classical and Norse mythology. Niles is entranced by a stained glass window in the church representing the Angel of the Annunciation, which he interprets as a kind and loving make-believe creature whom he fancies as a guardian spirit.

When Ada seeks to destroy her grandson, she appears to him first as the winged Angel of the Annunciation, whom he wished most to see at the moment of his death, then changes in his hallucination to the Angel of Death.

Some symbols, although vaguely associated with Christian imagery of evil, such as the lizard, have also a natural relevance to the conditions of the story. A chameleon is the master of disguise, literally changing color to fit the environment. Niles might be called an internal chameleon, changing psyches, but not his outer appearance, since he is already the mirror image of his brother Holland.

Adaptations

Tryon wrote the screenplay for Otto Preminger's 1972 film version of *The Other* for Twentieth Century Fox. Legendary acting coach Uta Hagen contributes a compelling performance, and director Robert Mulligan, keeping the emphasis on characterizations, never allows the suspense to lag.

Literary Precedents

The theme of two brothers or mysterious doubles as contrasts in temperament or moral nature is literally as old as written literature itself, appearing in the first written story of the hero (c.

2500 B.C. or earlier) about Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, and his wild companion, Enkidu. Pagan mythologies abound with sets of often opposed brothers: Osiris and his murderous brother Set in ancient Egypt, for instance, or Ahura Mazda, ancient Persian god of light, and his evil twin Ahriman, god of darkness, both born of the androgynous Ur-principle, Zurvan (Time). In the Hebrew-Christian tradition, of course, the first two brothers, Cain and Abel, feature in the first murder story, and have many literary descendants, such as Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952).

With the nineteenth century and the popularization of depth psychology, the concept of the unconscious mind contributed a new slant to stories of demonic possession. Mr. Hyde was neither a devil nor a separate person, but the good Dr. Jekyll's suppressed Shadow self. Writers such as Edgar Allan Poe developed a whole repertoire of traditional images and ideas to suggest that a weird and horrifying reality exists just under the surface of everyday life. One of the most successful ploys of such writers is to combine the occult notion of possession with the presumed innocence of children. The history of New England, where children did, in fact, inspire the only real American witch hunt, seems especially fertile ground for such tales. Perhaps the most obvious literary precedent for the demonic possession of children is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). It is no accident that *The Exorcist* (Blatty, 1971), a contemporary novel exceeding even *The Other* in popularity, also deals with a possessed child.



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