

Capote's "Miriam" and the Literature of the Double

Truman Capote's short story "Miriam"¹ appears regularly in anthologies as a contemporary example of fantastic literature. Critical notice of this story of the double or *Doppelgänger* has been rather scant; however, it is an accomplished piece of fiction that rewards careful study. Capote handles the device of the double with tact and authority, and we can appreciate his skill in portraying the encounter with a second self by comparing "Miriam" with other well-known stories of the double.

In the first place, the double in "Miriam" conveys an impression of objective reality that is rare for double stories. It is true that Miriam has no last name, is not seen by others, asserts suggestively (about the movies) that "I've never *been* before" (italics supplied), and seems to emerge at the end of the story from Mrs. Miller's reverie; however, the two meet in an ordinary public place, young Miriam has her own assortment of clothes and possessions, and she comes from the home of an old man who makes a brief appearance in the story. Thus, the double in "Miriam" is as much a character as a subjective phenomenon, which distinguishes the story from those where the *Doppelgänger* is obviously a figure of fantasy or hallucination (as, for example, Gogol's "The Nose" or Andersen's "The Shadow") or is clearly an allegorical figure embodying a psychological or moral aspect of the protagonist (as, for example, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*).

Capote, then, plays down the usual gothic and supernatural elements surrounding "the other" in the interests of verisimilitude. At first, we see Mrs. Miller, the kindly and ineffectual adult trying to help and understand an increasingly bold and self-assertive young girl. Only later do we sense that the older woman is experiencing a terrifying encounter with a repressed and stunted self. The ambiguous nature of the double figure adds to the uncanny quality of the narrative and to the thematic possibilities inherent in the relationship between Mrs. Miller and Miriam. In this respect, "Miriam" has an affinity with very complex double stories, such as Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixir* and Dostoevsky's *The Double*, which use the double motif to explore both extraordinary interpersonal relationships and psychological decomposition.

If the double figure is not a transparent authorial device whose significance is fixed and evident, the important question is the one asked by Mrs. Miller—"Why has she come?" At the beginning of the story Mrs. Miller's personality and character are so bland that she seems to have effaced herself from life altogether. In fact, she is described almost completely in negative terms: she lives "alone," is a "widow," her interests are "narrow," she has "no friends," has "rarely journeyed," was "never noticed," and so on.

Then she meets young Miriam, whose ethereal beauty and spontaneity bring a much-needed ray of light and gaiety into Mrs. Miller's drab world. The effect is almost magical. In the days following Miriam's first visit, Mrs. Miller feels exhilarated, goes on a shopping spree, dreams of leading a procession that has overtones of a fertility rite, and, in general, strays from the paths of thought and action that she has followed for years. In other words, initial contact with the rather exotic and mysterious Miriam taps a totally unexpected reserve of joy and imagination in the aging widow.

¹*Selected Writings of Truman Capote* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), pp. 17-30.

Later in the story, Miriam's mysterious and uncanny attributes are given greater prominence so that we begin to see her not only as a strange young girl, but also as a double figure, the suppressed self that Mrs. Miller must confront and cope with. The transformation from elf-child to *Doppelgänger* brings about a dramatic change in the story's mood. Miriam becomes eerie, threatening, and wildly self-indulgent; consequently, Mrs. Miller's gaiety is replaced by paralyzing fear and torpor in her presence. Furthermore, images of flowers, bridal dresses, and sweets give way to cobwebs, skeletons, and funeral processions, while the seemingly endless images of white—white dresses, white flowers, white hair, and so on—begin "to appall," as Frost puts it in "Design."

Miriam's changing role and impact emphasize the disastrous consequences of life deferred too long. Once fully awakened, the long-dormant energies of Mrs. Miller quickly elude her attempts at conscious control and vehemently assert themselves as an autonomous and independent personality. The result is psychological disintegration, withdrawal from reality, and obsession with the demands and frustrations of the "other" or "hidden" self. Our final view of Mrs. Miller reveals an isolated and shattered woman passively succumbing to the double whose power over her is now complete.

Miriam, the frost flower that blooms in the autumn of Mrs. Miller's life, is, in other words, not only a child who refuses to be sent away, but also the hidden self that refuses to be suppressed any longer. Tragically, Mrs. Miller is unable to cope with this belated discovery of a vital and unsuspected self, especially since it forces her to recognize the utter vacancy of her past life. Thus, what seemed a step towards personal expression and vital contact with the outside world (that is, the meeting with a homeless, friendless young girl) turns out to be the prologue to psychological decomposition, obsession, and despair.

The double figure emerges into Mrs. Miller's life, then, shattering its placid surface and indicating depths of personality long suppressed and unacknowledged. This, of course, is the kind of experience we expect in a double story. Capote's contribution to the literature of the double can be seen in the way he deftly creates and maintains an aura of actuality about Miriam while he insinuates her function as a *Doppelgänger*. This ambiguity intensifies the mysterious atmosphere of the story, renders the double figure much more solid and threatening than is often the case when we are obviously dealing with hallucination or allegory, and allows for a surprising and moving reversal in the protagonist's life as the full truth about Mrs. Miller's "visitor" is gradually revealed. In other words, Capote injects new life into the double story and demonstrates dramatically the truth of Guerard's assertion that "We traffic with doubles at our peril."²

Michael J. Larsen
Saint Mary's University

²Albert J. Guerard, "Concepts of the Double," in *Stories of the Double*, ed. Albert J. Guerard (New York and Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1967), p. 8.